

going deeper study guide

stained glass people :: God with skin on

“How’s the world gonna know that we’re Christians – a bumper sticker?!?!?!?”

Joyce Meyer

“Let’s give the people that don;t want God in their lives something to want.”

Joyce Meyer



The Church and Our World

The notion that we, as a church, are to be a representation of God to a lost world is an overwhelming sort of idea. Though scripturally true, it can leave us feeling like so much of our success in reaching the world depends on our flawlessly navigating the same spiritual land mines as the rest of the world. I mean really, there is a lot riding on this, right? The dilemma deepens when we realize that this burden falls not solely on the church as a body – but on the individual members who make it up. And as our analogy to stained glass makes clear, while we are, together, a beautiful piece of art, we are, individually, broken shards of glass, just as likely to cut someone as to edify them.

I do very much like the analogy of the church to stained glass. As Matt said in the initial message, stained glass was used, historically, to give common, everyday people of view of Biblical truth. Not much has changed. **WE** are the stained glass masterpieces of the church; designed by the master artist to show Biblical truth to common, everyday people. But this begs the question: when the world looks through our section of the stained glass, what does it see?

I believe this is more than a powerful analogy – I believe it is a wake-up call to the church. To understand the importance of our role in reaching a lost world. To answer a call to holy living that runs counter to popular culture and draws appropriate lines in the sand. To take our place among the other rough, broken pieces of glass and allow God to shine a light so powerfully through us that the truth of the gospel is clear and the simple, yet essential and life-transforming idea communicated to the world that there is a God who loves them and longs to have a relationship with them cannot be missed.

Q :: In a stained glass window, broken pieces of glass are used to create the larger image. What does this say about our own brokenness? --- Is brokenness a requirement? --- If so, how then are we to be used?

Q :: If the role of the church is to be “God with skin on” what is our role as individuals in all of that?

Q :: Take some time to talk about some of the ways that the church – as a collective body, or us as individual members of it – might present a *false* picture of God to the world.

If you have been in the church for a long time you have no doubt heard the name George Barna. He’s sort of the George Gallup of the church. His insights into the ways that church folk really, truly think and behave have been tapped in many a sermon illustration – and usually not in a good way. In an interview he said some things that are relative to this idea of us representing God and Biblical truth to our world that are worth discussing (questions are plugged in at the appropriate spots).

BARNA: What we have to be doing is to be thinking over a three-to five-year period of time “How can I expose people to all the elements that Scripture gives us that would help us to understand what it means to truly be a Christian?” Not to just understand what it means to be a Christian, but to truly be a Christian, to act like a Christian. When we look at the values, lifestyles, the moral perspective and behaviors of Christians, we can see that there’s virtually no difference between Christians and non-Christians.

This section was Barna talking primarily about church leadership, so it is pulled – *intentionally* – out of context. Because I see that mandate to “expose people to all the elements that Scripture gives us to understand what it means to truly be a Christian” as applicable far beyond church leadership.

Q :: What if all of us, individually, thought this strategically about our interactions with people, in terms of showing them Biblical truth? What would that look like and how would that be different than we interact with folks now?

Q :: Barna says: “*we’re happy to take the label of Christian and not have to deal with the responsibility*.” What do you think he means by that – and do you think he’s right?

Q :: I heard another possible way of communicating this idea: “You want to be ‘Christian’ as an adjective, but not ‘Christian’ as a noun.” How would you explain that concept? Might this be why there seems to be so little difference between Christians and non-Christians?

Q :: Does Scripture address this at all? How?

INTERVIEWER: *But do we really want to know what it means to act like a Christian?*

BARNA: *There are a couple of things that go into that. One of them is that we’re happy to take the label of Christian and not have to deal with the responsibility. You see, most of the churches in America have no God-given vision that they’re centered on. And so what do we wind up doing? We revert to playing the religious game. Let’s have more programs, let’s get more people in the seats, let’s build a bunch of buildings — all the things about which the world would say, “Ah, that’s success.” This has nothing to do with God’s equation of “Are you holy? Are you obedient? Are you serving? Do you want to be like Christ?” So we’ve missed the boat there.*

Q :: Barna talks about churches playing “the religious game”, where we start defining success as a church the way the world would define success. Can we run the risk of doing this ourselves, individually? What might that look like if we do?

...Secondly, people have to see it modeled. A lot of educational research has come out in the last five to seven years that shows that 60 – 70 percent of the behavioral change that takes place in people’s lives in America is based upon finding someone that they know, and that they trust, watching what they do, and imitating their behavior. So modeling is huge. Where in the church do we see this being modeled for us by high-profile, trustworthy, credible individuals? So this is another missing component.

Q :: Can you give an example of how modeled behavior impacted you to the degree that you imitated it?

Q :: In a culture where people are hugely more connected than ever before, but often in shallow, unaccountable and unsatisfying ways, how can we effectively model what it is to be a Christian – especially when we are often connected in the same ways?

Then we need to look at the whole element of “What is it that actually influences people’s thinking and behavior?” This is the focus of the research we’re doing right now. I don’t know the ultimate answers. But the preliminary insights would suggest that when we look at the major sources of influence in people’s lives, the church is not on the list. The major ones are movies, television, the Internet, publishing, public policy officials, parents . . .

Q :: At least parents made the cut, right? But at a time where we see the growth of mega-churches in many communities, when we have multiple Christian radio stations in town, and when so many identify themselves as “Christian” if asked, how is it that the church can be off the list of things that actually influence people’s thinking and behavior?

Q :: How can the church make a comeback and again be an influence in people's lives?

Q :: What effect might it have if we replaced the notion of "I'm a Christian, so I go to church" with "I'm a Christian – ***IAM*** the church!"

Does that sort of shift in thinking make a difference in how we live, or is it just semantics? If it might make a difference, how?

The idea of real success vs. the world's definition of success is touched on again, powerfully, later in the interview:

INTERVIEWER: *What you do reminds me of the radiologist who's just taken an X-ray and is holding it up to the light to see what's there. When you hold up that X-ray of the church, are you pessimistic, optimistic?*

BARNA: *There are a number of really great churches in America today. There are literally millions of individuals who love Christ with their whole body, heart, soul and strength. But in terms of where are we going? If we continue down the same path that we're going down now, the final frame of the movie is not a pretty picture. I mean, ultimately God wins, and his cause prevails. But getting to that point, we've radically lost our way. So unless we're willing to go back and significantly rethink what we're doing and why we're doing it, there's not an awful lot of hope of authentic Christianity surviving in America.*

INTERVIEWER: *That seems such a strange prognosis from you. When you look at many evangelical churches, so many are booming.*

BARNA: *Numbers. But so what? You're not measuring just numbers. That's irrelevant.*

Q :: If numbers are irrelevant as a measure of a successful – what ***IS*** relevant?

Q :: The call to rethink what we're doing and how we're doing it is a compelling one – and again, not just for the church as a corporate body, but for us all as individual members of it. How might our rethinking what we do and how we do it individually benefit the church from a corporate body perspective?

Conclusion:

I really love Joyce Meyer's quote that opened the lesson. I actually think it ties nicely into the theme for this sermon series. Are you going to be a bumper sticker Christian, or a stained glass Christian? A good question to ask. I'm convicted to see how in so many ways I can easily be the bumper sticker variety. I slap that Christian label on my activity and think by doing so that it is sanctified stuff. Much more difficult to place myself as a broken shard, fully surrendered to the wise hand of the great artist to place me where He wants me to be so that His story is told with greater effectiveness, clarity and beauty.

I wish this came more naturally. Alas, it does not. I found myself praying the other day: "Holy Spirit empower me to be able to surrender." I found that quite an odd juxtaposition of ideas. But it's true, for me to place myself in a position of surrender, I need Divine intervention. So many of the questions in this lesson are not really posed to anyone except myself. I long for a more effective walk for Christ than I have now.

I think Barna's summary statement about what impresses him is a wonderful target to aim at:

What impresses me is when I find people in a church who are living their lives around the notion that we exist for one reason and that is to know, love and serve God with all our heart, mind, strength and soul.

When I find people who don't just think of Sunday morning as the time to worship God but who look at every moment of their waking life as an opportunity to somehow worship and praise God, that their life is an act of worship —

When I find individuals who are willing to sacrifice some of their own joys and pleasures and resources to serve people who through no fault of their own have nothing in life, or certainly a lot less and they need help and they need encouragement and support —

When I look at individuals who want to a part of a community of faith that's encouraging each other, that's holding each other accountable, that's really serious about showing the world an alternative to the stuff that others are saying constitutes success —

That's what impresses me!

If that is who we are – who we, both individually and corporately, can become – then the image reflected in the stained glass will:

- .: Tell a story that communicates the hope of the gospel to the world
- .: Allow God to be the source of light that shines from within
- .: Bring MUCH glory to God