Development of Mass Communication Strategies for Church Growth:

Engaging American Culture

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Abstract

In this analysis, methods of mass communication employed by the church throughout its history will be reviewed. The context for this church study is specifically within American culture. Strategies for the most effective form of mass communication have evolved drastically within the past few years. For the church to properly engage in culture, it must understand the communication strategies that have intentionally or unintentionally been utilized throughout its history. An effective method of mass communication for the church is proposed.

Keywords: communication, church, strategy, culture

Development of Mass Communication Strategies within the Growth of the Church

and How to Engage with Culture in America

Introduction

Within this thesis, the history of the church, mass communication strategies, and the context of culture are reviewed in order to offer a proper solution for the church to use to engage with culture on controversial issues. The following pages discuss the methodology, justification, context, parameters of the study, scholarly reviews, and suggestions for further research to equip the church with tools to use. Mass communication is one of the best ways to give information or simply begin a conversation. However, with so many mediums, it can be difficult to determine the best strategy. The purpose of this thesis is to suggest the most effective strategy the church can use in the context of western American culture.

The Role of the Church

Many individuals may hold their own opinions for the role of the church in America today. It is necessary to consult unbiased sources that will be similar across all denominations to avoid controversies and come to a conclusion supported by what many Christians agree on. This unbiased source that is similar across denominations is the Bible. The role of the church in culture is explicitly described in the Bible. This will be the primary source of information.

Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV) describes the command Christ gives to his followers to spread the gospel across the world. In addition, 1 Peter 3:15-16 as well as Romans 1:16 discuss the readiness Christians should have to not be ashamed but share their hope with the world whenever an opportunity arises. Such opportunities are presented any time something in culture conflicts with a Christian's biblical values. 1 Thessalonians 2:4 (ESV) gives specific direction to, "speak,

not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts." Paul, the author continues to exhort the church to "try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret" (Ephesians 5:10-12). There are myriads of verses that support the conviction Christians have to engage with culture. It is of paramount importance for Christians primarily because it is a command given by Jesus himself to his followers.

Even with this explicit command, their worldview changes their outlook on culture and how they feel they should respond to certain issues. A worldview is a set of lenses with which one can see and interpret the reality around them. Many different cultures have different worldviews. Individuals within a culture have paradigms that are established through their life and development. The church is no exception to this. The worldview changes the communication or strategy to engage with culture.

Most Christians today are starting to understand, even in a postmodernist context, that a person's ideas and predispositions are largely influenced by one's worldview or past cultural experiences (Sider & Lowe, 2016). This is of paramount importance in order to evaluate how most of the current generation's history has affected their worldview. People's worldview affects how they vote, protest, work, and live in society. One postmodernist professor at New York University would even describe reality as social construct (Sider & Lowe, 2016). This is a worldview that is founded entirely upon the experiences one has received through society. This is the construct which the worldview is created. Once one can affirm this truth, it is easier to apologetically approach a conversation with the proper strategy to discuss controversial issues. Even within religious communities, studies have shown that, with an increase of religious

individualism, it is perpetuating a progressive religious ideology not present in previous forms of

religious individualism (Madsen, 2009). This is essential to note as well when approaching

others who may even deem themselves already as "religious."

Biblically speaking, Christians have many viewpoints on controversial issues in culture.

What some would argue are "gray matters" of the faith can be seen somewhat plainly in

Scripture. These include thoughts on homosexuality, abortion, politics, racism, and other

debatable topics in society. While this essay will not specifically be discussing these topics, it is

necessary to outline them so the church is clear on what they should be engaging with culture

about.

There is a unanimous decision among most Christians who believe they are instructed by

God to engage with others and spread the good news. Evangelism and participating in social

movements or action are critical and cannot be separated for the Christian (Sider & Lowe, 2016).

Some of those Christians would claim the Bible cites this in a variety of passages such as

Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV) which states, "[19] Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them

in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey

everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the

age." Many authors have urged Christians to share biblical principles because of the somewhat

increasingly immoral worldview of Americans today (Beckwith, 2016; Kinsey, 2005). These

authors would agree with Matthew 28:19-20. Any individual claiming Christianity should go and

make disciples despite their current cultural context, but especially in one which is departing

further away from once held biblical truth. Beckwith summarized that Christians are to be held

responsible for evangelism, regardless of the setting, because of the evolving unbiblical beliefs

today (Beckwith, 2016). Christians are responsible to engage in every facet of life because God

is over every single activity under heaven (Clouse, Pierard, & Yamauchi, 1993).

Current Status of the Church

In the context of the church in America, one study had statistical evidence demonstrating

the continuing decline of those practicing Christianity in America (Beckwith, 2016). There is an

increasingly large number of individuals who refuse to align with the Christian faith or hold to its

principles. One author, in an effort to explain the new landscape of Christianity in America,

focused on the challenges to the faith because of new cultural ideals that are uprooting seemingly

traditional values (Schmit, 2019). The church is unable to grow in part due to the changing

culture of America today. Because it is in decline, the church is unable to use proper engagement

techniques to cultivate conversation with Americans on controversial issues. Despite the

command of Scripture on the role of the church, the church is unable to act because of its decline

and ineffective communication mediums. The result of this is an irreligious America.

Barna (2016) boldly asserted that America is a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. If

Christians do not engage with culture, America will stay on this course and end similar to this

Old Testament city. Not only did Barna compare America to Sodom and Gomorrah, he also

accused the church for the reason America is on this trajectory. He argued that the church has

forgotten its biblical teaching and therefore cannot lead America, let alone its own congregation,

toward a godly life. Churches should greatly impact and ultimately change society for the

positive. This has been overlooked in recent history (Sider & Lowe, 2016).

There are many cultural changes that continue to have and have had an influence on the

church in America, whether school curriculum, racial tensions, or legal implications for marriage

and abortion. There are many areas of concern for the church. The church desires to speak out on

these issues but is lacking the necessary tools. Another area of concern facing the church is the

feministic ideals of many postmodern women (Askew, 2004). There have been a myriad of

changes in American society that has resulted in changes within and for the church. Mohler

(2011) highlights these by discussing different issues in his book on the changing cultural

atmosphere for Christians in America. The chapters are laid out including the morality of

abortion, the post-truth era, the challenges of new world religions, the new atheism in America,

the digitally different family, the new world of technology, the public law and politics, the

culture of offendedness, the terror of public education and many others (Mohler, 2011). The

church could use a variety of approaches to attempt to solve this problem; however, many

churches are negating this responsibility. In recent history, studies show most of the church

continually repeating older ministry ideas that gave the appearance of effectiveness (Rah, 2009).

However, these methods may prove to be ineffective with the new generation.

      One can conclude from these sources that the church has negated their responsibility to

engage with culture. Whether this was because they lacked the necessary means or

misunderstood the gravity of their calling to evangelize, the church must now recognize the

problem that has existed in the past to adopt proper techniques to engage with society today. To

come to a proper conclusion on what is needed for the church today, characteristics and

contributions to the problem must be assessed. A history of the church in America, strategies

they have previously used, and a general understanding of the use of mass media will be

reviewed in order to generate possible solutions as well as promoting a conclusion for churches

in America today.

History

The church in America has a history as far back as the first English settlers on the continent. However, much of the religious history of America that is impacting its culture today has evolved since the 1800s. Starting in the1850s, one can take note of spiritual awakenings and revivals through businessmen such as John D. Rockefeller or Milton Stewart (Culpepper, 2016). Some sources would contend that, initially, Christianity in America was largely promoted through corporate organizations and values. Citizens would apply and reflect the values present in their jobs to their lives outside of the workplace. The business sector was what held much of the responsibility for influencing the religious beliefs of Americans.

However, more recently, one can see how each decade marked a changing tide for the religious of society in this country. By the 1930s, many new theological reformations were being made among evangelicals (Askew, 2004). This was during the period of the Great Depression and WWII when many changes were happening in society. During the 1940s and 1950s, Christianity was on the rise in many mainstream media outlets, while many pastors tried to be moderate in their biblical approach as America entered the 1960s civil rights movement (Askew, 2004). Most often, with the changing religious approach in culture, political and cultural changes will occur simultaneously.

Conversely, in the past forty years, Americans have come to witness a widespread revolution of sorts in different cultural segments. These revivals do not focus on a specific outlet, such as the workforce, but are integrated throughout society by their communication mediums whether by television, radio, or other media. Some recent history regarding the growth and development of the church will normally include references to Religious Right, Moral Majority,

Christian America, and other trends that have impacted the religious environment of America

today (Culpepper, 2016).

By the 1980s, twenty percent of radio broadcasting was through religious institutions or

men who were championing the fight for religious freedom in America (Askew, 2004). The men

who were champions of these cultural transitions include Jerry Falwell Sr., Tim LaHaye, Francis

Schaeffer, and others. These advocates of a better Christian America were hallmarks during the

80s and 90s. This was also during a time that America was becoming a melting pot for religions

ranging from Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and other world religions (Askew,

2004). One author stated that with the rise of other traditional forms of religion, it demonstrated

many Americans were disappointed with worldly beliefs which offered no answers to life's

questions (Clouse et al., 1993). This author concluded, "The resurgence of traditional religions in

all parts of the world is one evidence of the emptiness of secularism, and this underscores for

Christians that they must no ignore the problem at hand and leave to others the task…" (Clouse,

et al., 1993, p. 591). The intent behind evangelism and using media outlets to express beliefs

became wildly popular. This time period was starting to mark a changing time culturally, not just

for Christianity or other world religions. From the Vietnam war to the birth of the internet,

America and the rest of the world was growing rapidly. The world was radically different then

what anyone had experienced before.

While the changing religious tide of America was coming ashore through these men,

other studies have analyzed the integration of faith education in schools and how this has

changed as well. This is of particular importance only because education was starting to change

the men and women who were beginning to lead the country. With a loss of prioritizing religious

values and freedoms, the younger generation was differing greatly from the more conservative

generations before them. Henrich (2015) included in his study, the conflict of the separation of

church and state in public schools for the past seventy-five years. Henrich evaluated the impact

of the loss of faith education, whether Christianity or otherwise, on the moral values of

generations today. The conclusions were somewhat discouraging for the interests of the church

and argued that religious historical classes should be reintegrated into common curriculum to

reinstate values in younger people (Heinrich, 2015).

The church has grown from grass roots evangelism to live-streaming church services.

The culture of America has changed at the pace of these religious movements, if not more so.

While statistically the church is in decline, one author, Schmit (2019), is urging the church to

engage more with culture. Schmit argued this current movement is an opportunity to ask

questions, be with our neighbor, use these popular mass media strategies to the church's

advantage, and see this changing cultural moment as an avenue for the message of God to move

understanding that God is still at work even in these shifting tides of America. The church can

become vibrant in America again whether through the upcoming generation, the corporate world,

or the next cultural revolution (Culpepper, 2016). Social media platforms have to be considered

within these implications for the church. These sites can produce powerful content and have

excellent delivery to consumers and, therefore, churches can work on contextualizing the gospel

in these areas (Rhea, 2011). One must understand religious beliefs may seem somewhat hidden;

rarely do people see their impact. However, these religious beliefs or unconsciously held values

are what is determining any one person's decisions in almost every facet of life and culture

(Barna, 2016).

This history and development of culture contributes to where the church sits today. In an effort to propose an effective strategy of mass communication that the church can use to reintegrate faith into society, criteria for proper solutions will be proposed as well as analyzed to come to the best conclusions.

Structure of Analysis

There must be several distinctions made for this analysis. These definitions and distinctions include but are not limited to the following: communication, types of communication, communication theories, modes of communication, the church, church denominations, religious affiliations, communication of the church, and mass communication from the church. A note pertinent to this study is to consider the church within the context of the American culture and civilized western society. This research should distinguish between types of communication and modes of communication. To have a proper understanding of the forms of mass communication, it must be defined and categorized based on the type of medium. Communication theories will be established and segmented apart from the distinctions made about the church.

Criteria of Solutions

The context of the study of media and the church in this examination is specifically placed with a set of boundaries. This aids in the validity of the research conclusions, accuracy in research data, and adds credibility to the claims presented. The context is crucial to understanding the continuing portion of this review on the church and its mass communication strategies. This context is the western American culture in which the church finds itself.

This essay will focus on applying principles to the American church and culture. This group is of interest because of its influence worldwide and the prevalence of growth in the media communications platform from this culture impacting trends around the globe. The solution the church utilizes must fit within this context. This is the first criteria to establish. In order to understand this culture, it will be defined. America is defined as the United States and citizens of this country. The media is considered part of the culture at large because of its integration in society and mass communication will be discussed later in this review. In America, the media plays an integral role in helping one understand his or her worldview and his or her place in the culture oneself (Martha, 2005). This will be essential to note for the furtherance of this thesis.

The demographics of America are wide and pervasive, depending on the area one might sample. There are culture groups in specific regions or specific communities that make America one of the most interesting places to study. Ethnic groups, race, age, and gender identity are complex and far-reaching. Overall, however, some trends seem consistent. There is an increase in diverse gender and sexual identity across the country. The decline of a white Christian America is sure (Wadsworth, 2017). In addition, the country continues to become more diverse and younger with millennials and Gen Z individuals beginning to enter the workforce. Because of this, communication strategy is changing. The way to connect with millennials and Gen Z over social platforms is becoming increasingly important. Rhea (2011), in her study, argued that technology is creating an environment where each individual has the ability to create and share unique content, which is affecting the communication strategy of almost every outlet. Rhea's study reported statistics from the New York Times showing that seventy-five percent of teenagers have cell phones. Of the seventy-five percent teens who have cell phones, a large

majority of those teens are also on social media (Rhea). This is quickly becoming one of the

primary ways to communicate with the younger generation because of the percentage of

teenagers that use these platforms.

One author would conclude "Millennials, the generation whose choices will ultimately

determine the nature of Christianity and the church in America for several decades, appear

poised to support…the shift away from biblical Christianity" (Barna, 2016, p. 29). In addition,

with most of the upcoming generation rejecting traditional forms of Christianity they are turning

to individualism or universalism (Barna, 2016). It will be essential for the church to

communicate to this generation. Strategy is now built on a number of factors and is continuing to

become more complex.

The application group and demographics are relevant to this study so that one can

understand the culture the church is engaging with. Different strategies work within America

compared to other nations. America is increasingly diverse and changing because of the

upcoming generations. Mass media strategies will be different than any other context.

Culture

It is necessary to define culture for the sake of this study. Culture will play a crucial role

as this study unpacks the relationship between the church and culture. This is the second criteria

in proposing a solution as the conclusion must support the culture it is addressing. Mass

communication methods are what is employed by the church to engage with and evangelize to

culture. In order to understand the target audience for the church and build parameters for the

sake of this study, a proper definition, as well as context is provided. Because culture is

continually evolving, it is necessary the church often evaluate the cultural landscape to
effectively reach people for Christ. With new culture, old methods may not be as effectual.

Definition

Some say culture is a combination of set of symbols members identified to engage with
others (Maschio, 2016). Others still say it could be a result of ongoing creativity or that it was a
guidebook of how to make decisions in everyday life (Maschio, 2016). Most people would
acknowledge however, regardless of what it is, that culture is considerably different from
country to country, as well as from one group to the next. This is because culture is cultivated by
the people within the stated community. Culture is ever evolving and developing in different
contexts. Culture can include different ethnicities. Some claim ethnicity as their cultural identity
as well (Clouse et al., 1993). Not only do individuals discover their unique identity through
culture, but Rhea (2011) stated that culture is the place where most people also develop their
understanding of reality. Culture is constantly created, whether consciously or not, and can
impact how one may view the world.

Specifically, culture is an attitude toward beliefs that sets a standard of norms for a group
of people. Maschio (2016) described culture as the outcome of similar desires of individuals in a
group. Because culture is largely be based on desire, it can constantly change. This change may
stem from the influence of individuals within the group or how they appeal to others for a
diversion from culture norms. Therefore, culture is created by the group but, more specifically,
by the individual. The values of the culture are maintained, changed, or disregarded simply on
the accountability of one individual. Culture is essentially similar to the analogy of an onion
(Rhea, 2011). There are different layers in which each individual may attribute different values

to cultural concepts or realities. It is imperative in an assessment of culture to understand this dynamic. It gives proper responsibility to the group while also accounting for the actions of the individual.

Culture establishes the foundations of one's values and his or her behavior within the cultural context of society will hinge upon those values (Rhea, 2011). On a basic level, this technical understanding of culture translates when, through the media, an audience can see how the values that one individual may hold will shape his or her actions and, thereby, shape the world around him or her. Culture can then change, whether positively or negatively. Each small act creates an impact for the whole. Therefore, whether it is Kanye West or a suburban mom, every person in society today has a part to play in culture and the narratives it possesses. Studies have been conducted to assess the persuasive appeals used to change social norms and there is contradicting evidence about which appeals can have the most impact (Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). There are many mediums and ideals with the potential to influence a culture or influence the individual. This is integral to the presupposition in this essay over the necessity of the church to utilize such mass communication methods in order to more effectively engage with culture on a broader platform. Without this assumption, the following study and suggestions would be ineffectual and unnecessary.

Current Effectiveness and Growth

While much of the history of the church and how communication methods impacted this were discussed previously, this portion is dedicated to assessing the effectiveness of these methods as criteria for a solution. The strategy the church uses must be effective and help the church grow; therefore, the effectiveness of past ministry efforts is reviewed. It is no doubt that

mass communication has evolved drastically in the past twenty to fifty years. One author

concluded that the new understanding of how one lives is no longer given to them, but self-made

(McCloud, 2007). This has changed how one may communicate and live in a religious context.

In addition, the accessibility of goods or products through online sources has made the

conversation evolve, particularly regarding the church. One author would argue that some of the

outlets of technology have impacted the church population negatively (Beckwith, 2016). These

changing and developing outlets potentially cause a disconnect between the older, morally

conservative Christian and the secular, morally ambiguous teenager on Facebook. Technology

can, as Beckwith reasoned, increase this generational gap and religious tension between groups.

New technological developments, massive integration of knowledge and the increasingly

diverse American culture in which all of this information sits has been pervasive across media

and created a disinterest in religion or Christianity (Beckwith, 2016). After the birth of

television, trends reflected the idea that media has become the center of culture, as well as

Christianity, with positive and negative outcomes (Hangen, 2002). One may conclude that the

church has been ineffective in captivating its target audience amid these changing cultural

landscapes from which new communication has risen.

Television and radio have been the primary source of information, but this might need to

change. Over the past few years, due to the advent of social media outlets, America as an

audience has changed. Some recent cases of Christians falling from grace in the public eye,

which has been discussed primarily on social media platforms, seem to have impacted the church

and the next generation in a way no one could have expected. The church has seemingly used

older forms of media communication such as television and radio while losing touch of what is

happening through millennials and Gen Z on social media. Much of this is not ministry efforts but largely out of their control. Some possible solutions will now be discussed.

Voice of the Church

In the 1980s, the religious right and other major evangelical groups were led by notable people in history such as Jerry Falwell Sr., Billy Graham, and others. Most evangelism was through television and radio. These men, and other advocates for Christianity in America, held to "a single, overriding goal: the conversion of the unsaved American public through the powerful – yet personal – reach of the medium of radio" (Hangen, 2002, p. 152). This should be the voice of the church today, whether on radio or otherwise. Whether that is the individual or a pastor or a outspoken contemporary, anyone who is a part of the church should consider themselves a valuable tool that can engage with others in their community. Advocates for the religious integration into society understood the impact of these tools and decided to utilize them.

One author comments on the voices that used these tools, "Religious radio sought to counter the social fragmentation of American life by using the very tool – the mass media – being portrayed as the culprit of the breakdown of American community" (Hangen, 2002, p. 157). Radio and television were the strategies developed during this age and could be potential solutions for the church today.

However, following the decline of these mediums, the voice of the church started to change. In the last fifteen years, a small but growing movement, organized under the label "emergent church," has begun. Despite the decline of Christianity in America, this will help push the church through what many of them believe to be the first careful steps that will usher in a new understanding of Christianity for the twenty-first century. An emergent church model is

quite a radical one that prioritizes the agency of those in attendance to determine the beliefs and

direction of the church (Burge 2015). While this could help be a voice for the church in America,

if not grounded in biblical principles, it would prove to be detrimental to one's faith. This is not

the commitment to the gospel as was seen in previous years.

       Many questions now follow. Once it is decided who speaks for the church, one must ask:

When do these voices speak out? Many churches have adopted a similar strategy to ministry and

reflect simply what has worked in the past but, with the quickly changing cultural landscape

Americans find themselves in today, it may not be the best approach (Rah, 2009). It is paramount

in communication to respond to the sender or message as quickly as one receives it. This is done

to engage in healthy dialogue and reflect one's genuine interest in approaching the subject.

Churches can adopt this mentality and be on the frontlines of cultural wars. The problem with

their communication is not a problem with when they are communicating, but a lack of

communication altogether. Authors concluded from one study that those who are located in

religiously dense communities are more likely to consider religious-based messages or be

involved in local churches (Blanchard, Stroope, & Tolbert, 2014). This is an integral part of

when the messages will be heard. If Christians in those religiously dense communities are

sharing with their neighbor on a consistent basis, it is more likely that others will be open to

these messages and the timeliness of the message will not have to be a strong consideration. One

author argued that throughout history the "American evangelical church tends to be a few steps

behind the rest of culture and society" (Rah, 2009, p. 109). When actively engaged in a

community, it would be near impossible for the church to continue in decline. This is another

solution that could prove to be effective for the church. This is similar to grass roots evangelism

where communication and engagement is largely done on personal or individual level. Some

other solutions are included in the realm of mass communication. These strategies are proposed.

Mass Communication

Mass communication has been derived from mass media which was created from mass

production (Boutie, 1996). It is somewhat difficult to assess the value of different forms of mass

communication because of what is exchanged through mass communication. Instead of a product

or service, what is being communicated is information. Information is qualitative and causes an

increase in the level of value attributed to its message and mode of communication

(Boutie,1996). Technology has created a wave of ways to connect with the world around us and

mass communication is the best way to capitalize on this opportunity. Mass communication is

therefore essential to the growth and development of culture as well as institutions (Ekwueme,

2012).

Mass communications and media communications have drastically evolved over the

course of the past 100 years, even in the past fifteen years alone. From newspapers to

broadcasting to film, mediums that were mostly present until the explosion of the internet were

the primary forms of national communication in the United States. With the invention of the

Internet, personal computers, and a cell phone, videos, blogs, vlogs, instant messaging, social

media platforms, information sharing networks, online news sources, and a host of other

mediums have been started. "New media" is a term now expressed through the mass

communication discussion and refers to Internet-based media (Boutie, 1996). It is no doubt that

anyone, no matter their age, has experienced a change in how one receives, processes, and uses

information because of all of these outlets. The quickly changing pace of these mediums will be

useful in order to investigate to analyze which mode is the most effective, whether longstanding

for the past 100 years or developed in the past ten. Sotirovic (2003) conducted a study using

attribution theory in which he showed that the portrayal of events in the media affects one's

understanding of the information when no other forms of media are present.

Methods

Martha (2005) discussed in an article the various outlets of mass media which included

television, newspapers, radio, film, internet, entertainment, and other sources of information as

mediums with which one uses to broadcast messages to large groups of individuals. There are a

variety of methods to use when deciding to communicate to a mass audience. One of the most

important factors of the strategy chosen is the target audience.

Once the target audience is assessed, proper language must be used to communicate.

Information which is then sent to these individuals is qualitative and must be stewarded as such

to the intended receivers (Boutie, 1996). One author suggests this language to be the most

concise, focused, and clear communication that the sender can manage (Ekwueme, 2012).

Effective Forms of Communication

There are a variety of effective forms and, regarding most communications, the most

effective medium is reliant on the type of message being communicated. Martha (2005)

concluded from her study on the integration of mass media and the faith that television has been

the most prominent and integral medium over the past fifty years because of its influence on

other mediums and presence in an American's everyday life. From the creation of the television,

it has captivated audiences and, despite the changing technological landscape, has remained a

constant source of information and communication. Almost fifteen years after the publication of

Martha's study, one could conclude that television has influenced the widest audience to the

greatest extent. However, a strong assessment of social media platforms must be examined

before a most effective form of communication is proposed. Some studies have shown that,

while social media can be a far-reaching and engaging platform for younger generations,

compliance and conformity alter the agenda of many users and can negatively impact the

intended message (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Theory of Communication

Ekwueme (2012) published a study that concluded, language in the use of mass media

would describe communication as "an integral part of human existence" (p. 440). On the most

basic level, communication is the exchange of messages from one receiver to another through

symbols, language, or other modes of contact in which a receiver can interpret the message.

Mankind cannot operate without a system to communicate. One author described it as this: "We

[mankind] learn to interpret reality by communicating with others" (Quentin, 2008, p. 19).

Regarding mass media, Ekwueme stated that mass communication and media are playing a vital

part in an individual's daily role in community and promotes the health of culture today. Mass

media can play such a role because of its integration within normalized society and the

information it brings to each consumer to inform or communicate the important topics of today's

society in America. If communication influences our view of reality and mass media is the

primary means of sending messages, then the media is what is used to support a person's view of

reality (Quentin, 2008). This could be the best way to transport information but might be

increasingly difficult to influence the value systems of people in the target audience.

Nistor and Beuran (2014) argued that mass communication is essential largely in part because it builds a public agenda and creates order to culture. The public agenda sets the tone for the cultural moment and tide. Therefore, media communication is the means by which culture grows and operates in. It is the veins and arteries that allow information, ideas, values, controversy, and change to flow through the entire society or group of individuals in question.

There are a variety of theories that are useful when assessing interpersonal communication, small group relationships, and mass media communication strategies. Most of these theories could be beneficial when evaluating a strategy of communication. However, a few will be considered for application within the church. For the purpose of this analysis, new media, otherwise known as Internet-based media, are considered. The church is missing the new generation of culture today. To connect with them, efforts must be made to communicate on their own turf, which is Internet-based platforms. This includes digital media, social media, video sharing networks, and digital platforms online.

There are numerous studies that suggest ideas about the importance of mass communication and media, the impact, or assessment of what needs to change for the future. These strategies may also be of good value for the church to integrate. Many of these have been utilized throughout this review. Perhaps the most important to consider is from Nistor and Beuran (2014). Their study was completed on journalism and the objective integration of religion with this news format. They found that religion and media are impossible to separate because of their prevalence in society and the rapid development that mass communications experienced (Nistor & Beuran, 2014). Mass communication and its objectivity are rarely understood terms. Thus, the medium proposed takes into account the integration of religion and media, how

Christianity has impacted the foundations of America, and how communication is changing the

world through this country today. With the criteria present, a solution that fits in the context of

America, actively engages with culture, and is effective in growing the church, is proposed.

Communication, the Church, and Culture

When discussing the need for the church to engage and how to approach this, a variety of

opinions have risen. Despite what any one individual may believe, one opinion has risen to the

front of the conversation. One author comes to the conclusion that what is more necessary is

simply Christians taking the responsibility to engage in conversation in whatever platform they

deem appropriate (Beckwith, 2016). This is not a heavily studied subject and this conclusion

could be largely biased.

However, one such opinion, by Martha (2005), stands out when considering the facts

already presented in this study. She contended that the church can only be successful if they

remember who they are as Christ would tell them they are amidst the confusing, dark, and

persuasive mass media today. Martha also concluded that the church may find a mission field

among the mass media where the message has largely been about self-indulgence, universalism,

fame, or wealth. She argued for engagement in the media because of the opportunity presented,

but only if the church is firm in its beliefs and equipped to connect with others who may disagree

with their value system. Martha's position seemed to account for the responsibility the church

has to engage with their community while also recognizing that the church cannot dictate the

beliefs of others. Despite many general beliefs regarding outlets or mediums to use, the

stewardship of a Christian's media ethics and their gospel faith is necessary (Quentin, 2008).

Hangen (2002) concluded, "Communication, after all, lies at the heart of religious experience

and at the soul of media institutions" (p. 157).

Solutions

Despite a strong urging to consider the advantages of social media and newer

technological mediums to communicate to mass audiences, this review would discourage this

approach for many reasons. Because of the current status of culture in which the church is in

decline, more transitional values becoming commonplace in society, and the volatile nature of

some outlets, would be reason enough to conclude social media and modern technological

mediums are the least effective option for the church. These highly engaging platforms can

create noise and alter messages being sent from the sender to the intended recipient. Basic

communication theory would argue the best channels decrease the amount of noise or feedback

present. Social media platforms are mediums which create the noise and do not intentionally

cultivate clarity of messages from senders to recipients.

Other solutions such as television and radio, while they may have worked in the past, are

ineffective in engaging with the younger upcoming generation. The church must reach this

younger generation because they are the ones with the power to alter the course of culture today.

In addition, this younger generation is transitioning away from the Christian values this country

was founded upon. Reflecting on this element in the criteria for solutions would lead churches

away from older evangelistic model of television or radio for their primary outlet of engaging

with mass communication strategies.

Ultimately, the best way to communicate includes knowing the audience and using every

means possible to clarify the intent of the message. One of the most effective ways to do this

while engaging with changing culture and still maintaining clarity of message would be through

video new media outlets. These means will clarify the most from the intended sender while

eliminating the volatile and confusing nature of social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

In addition, these video new media platforms reflect the younger context of Americans by not

utilizing television or radio communication strategies. Platforms such as YouTube, streaming

platforms, Hulu, Netflix, Roku, and other networks can allow for video formats of

communication that will help the church produce creative content appealing to younger

generations and promote this content to a wide range of audiences. This younger generation has

the most influence in the decision regarding which medium to use because of the impact of this

generation within American culture.

Finally, while engaging with culture is absolutely necessary, one must not forget that the

ultimate calling through Scripture is for the Christian to do all things in love (Sider & Lowe,

2016). However, over the course of church history, Christians have continually neglected to be

on guard towards culture and have slowly but surely slipped away from living their faith as they

should and doing so in a loving way (Sider & Lowe, 2016). Christians, even with the right

communication strategies, may ultimately fail if they neglect the command to love God and love

others, for apart from love, they are nothing (John 15:5b, ESV).

Implications for Further Research

There are many implications for the church presented by this research. One who is

dedicated to his or her faith must seriously heed the information presented in this study. In order

to evangelize and be obedient to the commands in Scripture, one should adopt these strategies to

advance his or her skills in this area. These communication strategies are useful particularly for

the church. Further research can be performed to see the effectiveness of these proposed

solutions and the result of paradigm shifts or whether they can be changed by these strategies of

the church.

In addition, studies that focus on the synthesis of information presented here could be

conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of this proposal. Should internet entertainment or

streaming videos be the best medium for the church to use? How can one integrate faith into

these mediums dominated by unbiblical sources? These and other questions are pertinent to this

study and will be helpful to the church at large when assessing how they can engage with their

community the best.

Conclusion

This research and analysis will be useful for the church at large to understand the past

communication triumphs and tragedies. This will educate the church on how they can more

effectively engage in culture today. This survey of information may not just be a benefit to the

church, but also those engaged in the study of communication. This survey studied the history of

the church, mass communication, and culture to synthesize the best mass communication

strategy for the church to use to engage with culture on controversial issues. The voice of the

church can be the individual which impacts the culture, or the mouthpieces that have influenced

culture the most in recent history. The essay discussed the methodology, justification, context,

parameters of the study, scholarly reviews, and suggestions for further research to equip the

church with tools to use. Reviewing the growth and decline of Christianity in America and how

the culture has changed gives the church a good foundation to begin healthy dialogue. One

author stated, "Just to think about the multiplicity of challenges confronting the church could

lead one to despair. However, the Christian must never waver in his or her belief that God's

sovereign power is at work in the world" (Clouse et al., 1993, p. 600). It is essential for the

church to take heart and be encouraged in its approach to culture today.

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