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The Influence of Modern Culture on American Christianity

Religions are regularly shaped by the society that adopts them and Christianity is no different. Since its beginnings Christianity has both shaped the societies that have embraced it and been shaped by the societies as well. In modern America, Christianity has been taken to a new level by the influence of culture in the forms of advanced technology, modern accommodations and comforts, and unique outreach approaches.

Christianity began over 2000 years ago and came to the United States over 300 years ago, creating a large amount of time for it to change, become modernized, and refreshed. It was known that, "From the inception of the British colonies, settlers flocked to North America's shores in search of freedom to practice their religious faith... The American colonies served as a beacon for religious freedom, according to the narrative, a respite from religious persecution that was common throughout Europe." (Green) This freedom became essential to the growth of Christianity in America, especially in its Protestant forms. Escaping Europe and its many dictations and rules of how to worship, when to worship, and what that was supposed to look like, led to less restrictions for Christian churches and even more changes over time.

Technology has changed greatly over time, each time creating more opportunities to modernize the way Christianity is practiced. Original Christian texts were first passed by word of mouth before being written down, later printed, and even later typed and shared electronically. As Christianity is a religion called to evangelize to all the nations, these types of

advances help to share their beliefs with others all over the world. There are many ways that technology has changed the church. Some agree with these changes while others challenge it, “The dual-edged nature of technologies is rarely considered in church settings or within Christian circles.” (Smith) As many people do not challenge technology’s regular presence in their everyday lives, from vehicles to entertainment, I would agree that many rarely look at technology critically, except for when a cell phone rings in service at the wrong time. Smith goes on to point out, “PowerPoint presentations, pretaped music accompaniment, synthesizers, video clips, global distribution of sermon materials and Bible study materials “McDonaldize” the faithful ... as they gather weekly to participate in a technologically saturated worship experience that might leave a dispassionate observer to wonder who or what is the real focus of the encounter.” (Smith) While singing in church is common as well as instrumental accompaniment, I can see that maybe there is an over-saturated worship experience occurring.

Large “Mega-Churches”, as they are called, are known to serve 10,000 or more people a weekend. When these people show up they may not even notice how much technology has been integrated into their experience. Music plays in the background as they walk in, a hidden electronic counter makes sure to count each new person as they walk into the sanctuary, and a person sitting at a large control panel monitors each of the cameras as they catch the pastor speaking and jumps to the best shot. To even further the technological experience some churches now offer their services live online to home audiences who cannot make it to the physical location of the services. While in many ways this technology is helpful to the churches in providing an experience for their congregations is the technology starting to take over? Would the same congregation listen to a message that wasn’t offered up with a catchy feel-good worship song? In many ways I doubt the average attender even sits through an entire

message without being distracted by their own personal technology during a service.

Christianity in American has definitely been permeated by technology as a part of our modern culture and expectations.

While modern American culture has influenced technology within the church, other aspects of the establishment have changed as well, including many accommodations and comforts. Numerous people in America have good reasons not to go to church, which may include such phrases as, “It’s a hassle to get everyone out the door on time and in nice clothes that early in the morning” and “Church is boring”. Some churches have attempted to combat such issues by adding many amenities not traditionally found in services. For example, those who say that they can’t make it on Sundays now have the option to attend Saturday night services instead if their church offers it. Some places, such as Grace Family Church in Tampa, FL, have come to offer such things as Starbucks locations within the church walls, with two Starbucks different locations on just one of their campuses.

Serving coffee isn’t the extent of the available comforts either; on Saturday nights after each service there is live music and freshly prepared food available in a large courtyard of the church. Free childcare is also available and encouraged for any age kid up through middle school so they don’t have to sit through and potentially disrupt the adult service. Mother’s rooms are also available as a place for a mother to privately breastfeed or soothe her child with the additional option of viewing the service live through a TV playing in the room. These changes to how a church operates and the services it now offers are the result of expectations created by modern American culture. The original services of the Christian church were not even in English, but now we give our congregation bulletins with service notes laid out and even offer such accommodations as sign language interpreters.

While all of these changes come from cultural influences, they have also been capitalized on by the church as a way to reach their congregation in new and unique methods. In the last words of the Gospel of Matthew are a few verses known as The Great Commission, “Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”” (Holy Bible: New International Version Matthew 28:17-20) As a Christian one of the driving forces behind what we do is this direct statement from Jesus. He calls upon his people to go and share the gospel with others.

Reaching people with the Christian gospel in modern America can be challenging. Many are simply too busy for Christianity or are influenced and filled by so many other things that there just isn't enough room. To better communicate with their audience Christianity has turned to many modern resources. Almost every large church now fully engages in social media. It is not uncommon for them to have a Facebook page, twitter account, and Instagram. The highly involved churches might even have FourSquare, Snap Chat, Pinterest and Vine. Any respectable church will also have a modern website with a calendar of current events and potentially a blog that pastors and other leaders within the church contribute to.

All of these things allow new platforms to engage with their target audiences. These tools are initially free and allow a platform that can be updated at any time to connect with people. For example, if a church event is going on, a tweet can be sent with an image and a hash tag letting others know about the opportunity. This can be retweeted by other members of the church and eventually it may provide someone with information about the church they were previously unaware of.

Simple organic moments like these create a network that is vital to the success of a church nowadays. One of the largest audiences that does not currently attend church are those in their twenties and thirties, especially without kids and unmarried. So what do churches start doing? Creating events for that specific age group in that specific season of life. Never in anything have a read did the first church host a night where the pastors answered questions about sex and what it looks like to stay pure and then there was a gathering that included food trucks, a DJ, and outdoor games for everyone to enjoy.

Churches have taken how they reach out to people to a whole new level. They will create opportunities that people have never had, they will come to where the people are, and if they are good at it, they will convince the people to join their church. Outreach approaches for centuries have worked as ways to evangelize by meeting a particular need, but as modern American culture shifts and changes, so will the ways that churches reach out to their communities.

While no one can say for sure whether these methods will be for the long term good or bad of the church, today's churches are being influenced by modern American culture through technology, accommodations and comforts, and unique outreach approaches.

Word Count: 1519

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