

General Topics :: The Triumph of Form over Substance

The Triumph of Form over Substance, on: 2016/2/24 13:00

What do I mean by the triumph of form over substance? Well, it typically means that content or the subject does not matter, what matters is how a thing looks. In other words the subject itself does not have to have any depth or true meaning it only has to look good and feel good.

I would argue that this current political cycle is a perfect example of form triumphing over substance. The rise of Donald Trump is the rise of form over substance. He merely taps into the mood of the people and says what he needs to say to get elected. He is an amalgam of our personality cult culture and business and now politics. This is the end result of a long process that could only truly find its successful conclusion with the rise of media and especially social media.

Now there have been notable people from the previous century that gives us clues as to how we got here. If we look at Hitler we see a man who could never have arisen without the aid of radio and the camera and of course circumstances. The circumstances are obvious. There was social unrest caused by a financial meltdown. This of course was severely aggravated with the rise of socialism and communism throughout the world. Given these fears and others, the people turned to someone who promised to make Germany great again. Someone who would face the problems of the day head on. Now they knew that he held extreme views but their fears for their present situation overcame any misgivings they may have had for him. The basic premise throughout the ruling classes was "he would at least sort out the Communists," which of course he did yet they had unleashed a monster.

Along with all those reasons, Hitler could still not have come to power without the aid of media. Radio of course was the social media of the day. People gathered in their living rooms and listened to his captivating speeches. They also went to the movies and saw such productions as "Triumph of the Will." A movie about the rise of the Nazi party that combined music and clippings of speeches and rallies. It is purported to be the greatest propaganda movie of all time and truly shows the power of media, form over substance, to move a whole nation. And of course that power has only increased exponentially over the last 80 years.

The first ever televised interview of two politicians debating was in 1960 and was between Nixon and Kennedy. Unbeknownst to Nixon, Kennedy had the heat turned way up in the studio because he knew Nixon had a tendency to sweat. When they both sat down to debate, Kennedy looked cool and collected while Nixon sweated badly. This had a great effect on the viewing audience. No matter what one of these men you liked, it could easily be argued that Kennedy knew the value of form over substance, it was less about what they were saying and more about how they were coming across to the audience.

In the church we are living, for the greater part, with the triumph of form over substance and the evidence of that is the depth or lack thereof of Christianity in our society. While we have had no Hitlers in the church (many mini ones) we have had many charlatans that used the power of the media and the rules of entertainment to water down the message while promoting themselves. Now three of four generations into an entertainment driven church we are left with a shallowness of showmanship that engages the "audience." Tozer writes "The church that cannot worship must be entertained. And men who cannot lead a church to worship must provide the entertainment." I would argue that all across Christendom in the west we are seeing leaders who lead the people by providing entertainment.

Tragically we have seen that as the world goes so goes the church. Of course it should be the exact opposite, yet here we are. You will hear excuses about staying relevant and keeping up with technology and so on. I personally have nothing against technology but when it becomes an integral part of the "show" on a Sunday morning then you know that the plot has been lost. Today we are being driven by the form and not the substance. The cultural winds have simply taken a hold of the church and the church is being driven along by these winds towards what destination? What is the end for such a church? The complete amalgam of the world with the church. This is a tragedy. The church was supposed to be a counter-culture not a sub-culture.

Yet if there is an enemy that seeks to swallow up the church whole by means of swamping it with the world, he has badly miscalculated. We see in the secular world that given enough frustration the electorate eventually rebel against the establishment that has become corrupt. This election cycle is a perfect example with men like Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. If the world can react against the corruption of the system then even more so good brothers and sisters in Christ.

As always Satan will overplay his hand and brothers and sisters will simply leave corrupted institutions behind. The more our enemy overplays his hand the more he drives saints together and actually helps the Scriptures come to pass. Jesus prophesied in John 17 that we should be one just as He and His Father are one. We shall see this come to pass.

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.....And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:(Eph 4:4-13)

Brothers and sisters God is raising up apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers. Not the children of the system that we see today, but genuine saints whose primary goal is the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry and the edifying of the Body until we all come into the unity of the faith. The unity of the faith is the work of God Himself through His Holy Spirit and the spirit of the world that has invaded the church will only drive the saints towards such a unity that will undoubtedly be forged in the fires of persecution. Pursue the substance of God with all of your heart and soul and mind and do not be distracted by shiny things that make a lot of noise and attract attention. The substance of God will triumph over the form of man.

Re: The Triumph of Form over Substance - posted by dolfan (), on: 2016/2/24 13:17

Appolus, your observations on how form over substance effects the American church are well taken by me.

I recommend to anyone here that you grab a copy of the little paperback written by Neil Postman in the mid 1980s called "Amusing Ourselves To Death". It was an influential book for my view of the world and remains so. (I read it in college in 1993 as an assignment by my very devoted Christian communications professor, Janet McMullen, at the University of North Alabama.) Postman made this observation that Frank makes, but in more detail. He specifically discusses the effect of our amusements/entertainment on how we perceive sacred things. Postman was a liberal and an academic, not a Christian, but in the book he leans hard into the destruction of religious thought that (when he wrote the book in 1985) television has wrought.

If Postman's observations don't stop you in your tracks, we're wired differently. :) If you find his book compelling, I would urge you to then read his book, "Technopoly", which is a deeper and more historical treatment of the same sort of idea. Again, he wasn't a Christian, but he was careful to criticize how the sacredness of religious belief is an early victim to the amusement/entertainment apparatus in culture. Worth the read, I guarantee you.

And, if you REALLY find Postman compelling after reading those two books, you can access a couple of books online for free on a house church website, written by Vernard Eller, who was a Christian. Postman and Eller -- I don't know if they ever met -- but their works dovetail with one another and Eller puts things specifically into the context of the church and how we live. Not that you'll agree with him 100% or even that you should, but it will absolutely be a benefit to your thought process and to help you develop understanding on these matters. And, these matters do matter. :)

Re: The Triumph of Form over Substance - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2016/2/24 13:18

Quote:
-----Brothers and sisters God is raising up apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers. Not the children of the system that we see today, but genuine saints whose primary goal is the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry and the edifying of the Body until we all come into the unity of the faith.

Amen dear brother. Satan has infiltrated but Christ will be victorious with His body on this earth. Nothing can stop the purpose of God in the earth. Christ is Victor. Amen.

Re: , on: 2016/2/24 16:19

Hi Tim,

These books sound very interesting brother. We are undoubtedly somewhere down the road of how media in all its many forms have affected us. Entertainment seems to rule. That is why this quote is so potent "The church that can't worship must be entertained. And men who can't lead a church to worship must provide the entertainment." And of course Tozer died in 1963bro Frank

Re: , on: 2016/2/24 17:40

Greg writes.....

"Amen dear brother. Satan has infiltrated but Christ will be victorious with His body on this earth. Nothing can stop the purpose of God in the earth. Christ is Victor. Amen." Amen bro Greg, amen.....bro Frank

Re: , on: 2016/2/24 17:50

Tim, if you get a chance watch the movie "A face in the crowd," starring Andy Griffith from 1957. This movie was way ahead of its time in relation to television's influence on the masses and politics.....bro Frank

Re: - posted by dolfan (), on: 2016/2/24 19:28

Great movie. Saw it 2-3 times. :) You are right

Re: - posted by dolfan (), on: 2016/2/24 19:31

From Postman in "Amusing...."

"We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelings, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in Brave New World Revisited, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In 1984, Orwell added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we desire will ruin us.

This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right."

Re: The Triumph of Form over Substance - posted by MaryJane, on: 2016/2/24 23:44

Greetings Frank

This was very eye opening what you shared here with us. Thank you for being faithful to post this. I know in my heart that GOD is pressing ever deeper in my own life that its not just about knowing how to "play church" or how to "say" the right things...its about surrender, its about obeying, its about loving, and serving others daily. Following JESUS is not a "me" and "i" focus the cultural church wants us to believe it is. Those who love HIM, who truly desire the things of HIS KINGDOM, reject the lies of the enemy and the world. Those who know HIM, and are known by HIM will only ever settled for the "REAL" in their lives where JESUS is KING and LORD. Anything less is just not worth considering...

God bless
maryjane

Re: , on: 2016/2/25 14:34

Hi Tim,

Just from reading that quote it seems to me that Huxley has a more accurate view. Writing a book in 1948 with the backdrop of WWII would have had a huge influence on Orwell. I once had a vision, a word, call it what you like about the invasion of Europe by something far more insidious than Nazi's.

Huxley writes Brave New World Revisited(1958) somewhat later than Orwell's book and perhaps with some distance between him and WW11 he has this more nuanced view. Whatever it is I think Huxley is on the money but I do see that a "healthy," backdrop of fear can play into his view. When someone comes to the edge and avoids falling down the hole then an unrealistic optimism might spring forth.

Right now we see fear playing a major role in the success of men like Donald Trump. There is a backdrop of China and Americans wanting someone to stand up to them, restore their pride so to speak, same goes for ISIS. Of course there is also a backdrop like this in the 30s in Germany where a people believe they have lost their dignity and someone comes along promising to secure the fatherland and restore it to its rightful place. Strangely enough the Jewish people were looking for something like that when Jesus enters the scene. Ultimately the choice would be Barrabus, a man who had stood up to the Roman machine. The man of peace is killed and the man of war goes free. Yet of course all of this leads to the ultimate demise of Israel and the destruction of everything they held holy. The same went for Germany because they followed the man of war. The scapegoat was Jesus, sacrificed for the good and preservation of Israel. The Jewish people were the scapegoat, sacrificed for the good of the Fatherland. The last scapegoat will be the Christians, sacrificed for the good of the world.....bro Frank

Re: , on: 2016/2/25 14:39

Hi MJ,

Amen sister, there is a focus on "I," and not Jesus. Someone asked me in another venue if the Substance that I was talking about in the piece was a "radical simplicity." There is a desperate need to strip it all down to where it all begins, Jesus and Him hung high on the cross because of His love and the love of the Father. I have grown desperately weary of the centuries of additions, traditions if you like. Some may not be bad in and of themselves but they are coloring outside the lines. We need to get back to the beating heart of God our heavenly Father. Throw it all off and simply begin to walk again, just me and Jesus and His revolution of man right down to his DNA. Substance=radical simplicity=walking with Jesus.....bro Frank