

## The Church Relevant

### “What Happens When the Church Develops Cultural Distraction?” (Third in the Series)

March 31, 2019

8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.

*<sup>1</sup>From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! II Corinthians 5:16-17*

**C**ultural distraction--an interesting phrase really. It's hard to imagine how a massive group of people who have been called to a single task can get distracted from the one thing they are required to do in the first place. An article I read from *The New Yorker* along with an article I read in *Outreach*. It helped me to answer at least one question about what is happening in churches in our urbanized experience. Allow me to read an excerpt from *The New Yorker* article titled “A New Theory of Distraction,” by essayist Joshua Rothman.

“ . . . distraction retains an aura of mystery. It's hard to define: it can be internal or external, habitual or surprising, annoying or pleasurable. . . There are, in short, varieties of distracted experience. It's hard to generalize about such a changeable phenomenon. . . There are two big theories about why it's on the rise. The first is material: it holds that our urbanized, high-tech society is designed to distract us. In 1903, the German sociologist Georg Simmel argued, in an influential essay called “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” that in the tech-saturated city “stimulations, interests, and the taking up of time and attention” turn life into “a stream which scarcely requires any individual efforts for its ongoing.” (In the countryside, you have to entertain yourself.) One way to understand the distraction boom, therefore, is in terms of the spread of city life: not only has the world grown more urban, but digital devices let us bring citylike experiences with us wherever we go.

The second big theory is spiritual – it's that we're distracted because our souls are troubled. The comedian Louis C.K. may be the most famous contemporary exponent of this way of thinking. A few years ago, on “Late Night” with Conan O'Brien, he argued that people are addicted to their phones because “they don't want to be alone for a second because it's so hard.” (David Foster Wallace also saw distraction this way.) The spiritual theory is even older than the material one: in 1874, Nietzsche wrote that “haste is universal because everyone is in flight from himself”; in the seventeenth century, Pascal said that “all men's miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone.”<sup>1</sup>

It is in the synthesis of these two ideas about distraction that we hear an alarm about what could point to the church's slide into its own distraction. So, the phrase “cultural distraction” does not mean that the church is distracted by culture. Rather it is distracted in it as a part of the human fabric that is known by the ever changing cultural transition. Theologians can make the argument that the church is somehow separate from society, but the every day Christian human is, without doubt, caught up in the distraction shove on it by everyday living. So, if distraction can be both material and spiritual, which sounds very biblical to me, then hear these words about why the church is being absorbed as changed agents rather than agents of change. “[T]he

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Rothman, “A New Theory of Distraction,” *The New Yorker*, June 16, 2016).

world grown more urban, but digital devices let us bring citylike experiences with us wherever we go,” and “Pascal said that “all men’s miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone.” The result?? Counter stimuli that lead into world-weariness. As Rothman concludes, “In many ways, of the two, the material theory is more reassuring. If the rise of distraction is caused by technology, then technology might reverse it, while if the spiritual theory is true then distraction is here to stay. It’s not a competition, though; in fact, these two problems could be reinforcing each other. Stimulation could lead to ennui<sup>2</sup>, and vice versa.”

Matthew B. Crawford has written philosophical insights about the problem in his book *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, April 1, 2015). While not blaming technology, Crawford suggests that the external (materialism) and internal (spiritual) distractions are influences that have beset us from our individuality. These distractions have had a cumulative effect on Western culture. His argument is that we have lost our autonomy, and the twist is, that it is possible using our hands and craftsmanship to gain back some of our autonomy through concentration.<sup>3</sup>

I am convinced that the success that is occurring among some congregations has to do with how they interpret the import of this social phenomena. Why do we look over our own cultural fences to see expressions of the same church of Jesus Christ prosper in their efforts while others languish in their failure? What we see from afar are organizations of Christians who are offering a higher and seriously more rewarding way of life that is not mired down by distraction. I have to say, while I was writing this sermon a pop up announced that the Mueller report is 300 pages so there must be more to it than the four-page summary. “I’m trying to write an important message here, you guys.” “Come, on. Give me a break.” My autonomy has been taken over not by my own desire to know, but by other forces that are designed to distract me, while rendering my spirituality null and void. And, then, I heard God speak to me in the silence around my room. “You will acknowledge the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

“Free?” Free from cultural distraction? Here then is the confession we must make concerning distraction and the loss of our individual freedom. I need to be free from the distraction that facilitates the loss of my autonomy as a Christian. I need to discover healthy ways to encounter my world as a representative of Christ’s kingdom. I need to learn how to distinguish between worldly distractions that dehumanize me in favor of those spiritual enrichments that reinforce my soul with spirituality. I don’t want to be in flight from myself. If Facebook is the detractor, then I relinquish it for the cause of Christ and the new created order. If there are politics that promote discord and fear, then I drop them in favor of a new world politic of love of God and love for my fellow human beings, whoever they are. I confess that I have technologically ventured into worlds of violence, chaos, misery, devalued humanity, death, and destruction for my entertainment and those distractions have taken from my the solemnity of solitude, and causes of peaceful existence. I confess that Alexa is my friend while I am really alone, my humanity unwittingly given away to the power of technology while the power of Christ within me has been pushed behind some closet door in my life. I confess that I am not free. I am not free indeed. And, my distractions are my woeful self-disintegration.

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<sup>2</sup> Tedium, boredom.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.matthewbcrawford.com/new-page-1-1/> (accessed March 28, 2019).

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