

Don't equate cultural Christianity with the gospel, Chandler insists

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Christians need to learn not only how to engage the culture in a gospel-focused manner, but also avoid becoming a captive of cultural Christianity, speakers and panelists said at the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission's national conference.

North Texas Pastor Matt Chandler said the Bible Belt has "churches that are filled with unregenerate (people) in a culture where any type of conservatism is just lumped in to being a Christian."

In the Bible Belt, pastors often need to help "really moral church folk understand that they're non-Christians" and "deconstruct the idea that Jesus is about good people," said Chandler, pastor of The Village Church in Flower Mound.

Transformation, not trying harder

Speaking on the parable of the lost sheep, coin and son in Luke 15, Chandler said: "The mission of God is to seek and save the lost—not moral betterment. That's what happens when we are saved, right? We are going to be transformed from the inside out."

"Well, the Bible Belt is so twisted around this idea," he said, adding he has been overwhelmed that "the basic gospel message has been completely lost on a full generation."

The reality for a Christian that "all of life is repentance" needs to be

understood in the church, Chandler said.

Otherwise, “every little struggle they have will be hidden in the darkness because they will believe that they did that when they got saved,” he said. “I just can’t tell you the sheer volume of people I know who are enslaved to sin and feel like they can’t tell anyone about it, because they got saved 15 years ago.”

Quest for control

Andy Crouch, executive editor of *Christianity Today*, challenged conference audience to consider whether they—and the American church—are “on a quest for control,” particularly of culture.



Andy Crouch, executive editor of *Christianity Today*, talks about culture and leadership at the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission national conference. (Photo by Rocket Republic) Human beings are given authority—the capacity for meaningful action—and vulnerability—exposure to meaningful risk, he said. But control itself is a testament to true motivations, he added.

“You know someone is addicted to control (if) when their control begins to slip, they become violent,” Crouch said. “What our culture has perceived of us Christians is they see us losing control of culture, and they see the rage with which we react to that loss of control.”

Crouch proposed an alternative approach—true leadership and leaders who “just show up and are honest about their limits, honest about our limits and call us to live a life of risk.”

Follow Jesus, invest in others

Robby Gallaty, senior pastor of Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., pointed conference participants to a two-fold strategy Jesus gave the church to engage the culture—an invitation to follow him and invest in others.

“We’re going to change the culture the same way Jesus changed the culture, and that’s with an invitation to follow him,” Gallaty said. “We will never affect the culture publicly until we have been transformed by the gospel privately.

“Intimacy with God always precedes ministry. Who we are in Christ trumps what we will ever do for Christ.”

Recover the work ethic

Greg Thornbury, president of The King’s College in New York City, said he is worried as someone who leads an institution preparing young adults for the world.

“I am concerned that the rightful teaching of grace in our churches may be producing a slacker generation that will damage our witness in culture in coming generations,” he said.

“We need to recover the work ethic that made the people of God who they were in every cultural situation.”

Connect to the Great Commission

During a panel discussion, Trevin Wax, a publisher for LifeWay Christian

Resources, said cultural engagement should be connected to the Great Commission.

If cultural engagement is simply a way for Christians to seek “to show that we’re culturally savvy ... then that is the way to disaster,” he said. Christians should possess a “Great Commission understanding of people around us so we can effectively present the gospel,” he added.

On the same panel, Jackie Hill Perry, a poet and artist with Humble Beast Records, encouraged young Christians to demonstrate “an intentionality” about their lives and to use their “online presence for the gospel, for the glory of God.”

Hill Perry also urged young Christian couples: “Don’t be afraid to have children. If we are not raising disciples now, who will be the ones to carry the torch later?”