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Hopeless in America: Opportunity for Outreach

“What do you do?” asked the man in the next seat on the long flight to L.A.

“I’m a consultant,” I responded, intentionally hiding my “church” profession so that I might witness as a “child of God” rather than a “church expert.”

“What do you think of our country?” he asked, with a deep tone of despair.

I remained silent, anticipating another sentence or two...from a man who wanted to unload his frustrations. I was right.

“I can’t remember...” he paused, looked down and sighed, “...I don’t remember a time when things were so screwed up.” He continued, “The recent election was so discouraging...on both sides.”

“Did you vote?” I asked, without asking *how*.

“Yeah, but I really wanted to write a letter of dissatisfaction with almost everything,” he said.

“Yeah, a lot of people say that,” I said, wondering if he was a person of faith, lapsed

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Kent says, “The window of hopelessness is a window of opportunity for Christians and their churches. We are dedicated to help churches in this harvest season to develop strategies to reach unbelievers.”



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faith, no faith, or whatever.

The conversation continued for an hour before I “showed my hand” – shared my faith. Like many conversations these days, there is great unrest in our world and our nation. You might call it “emotional instability.” It occurs in any social unit from time to time — even in churches. It’s justifiably painful, but worth taking a look...as a window of opportunity.

Emotional Instability

In the world today, there is a rising level of pessimism about the future. When I was young, I noticed that older people would complain about the way the world was “falling apart.” So lately, I’ve been wondering if it was just me. But research shows that even millennials are discouraged. What’s going on?

Of course, ISIS has everyone rattled. So do ongoing shootings in theaters, at malls, and in urban areas. Then, there’s the corruption in Wall Street. In addition, it seems like we’ve watched government gridlock forever. There’s also the predicted end of Social Security as we know it, the astronomical rise in medical care, the \$20 trillion debt, nuclear noise from Russia, an unstable leader in North Korea...do I have to go on? It’s enough to give an optimist like me a major headache! That is, until I think of what God did about 2,100 years ago.

The Climate of Israel

God is God, of course...and can do whatever He wants, whenever He wants. So why didn’t He send Jesus when Moses was leading the Israelites from slavery in Egypt? Good question!

A better question is why God would send Jesus to Israel at precisely the time that He did. Put yourself in that place, at that time. Think about it, and put yourself in their shoes...or sandals. God promised the land to the Israelites. They didn’t just migrate there or win a war to take it over. Even though there were struggles, there was always that certainty: “This is the land God gave to His people.”

Fast forward even to modern times. About a decade ago, I was asked to consult the government of Israel, along with one other American Christian leader and two American rabbis, one Reformed and the other Orthodox. The Israeli government flew us over there, “wined and dined us,” and treated us like dignitaries. We interviewed cabinet members, and I had the chance to interview the man becoming prime minister of the country, Ehud Olmert, the former mayor of Jerusalem.

Prior to our mission, we studied the writings of Israeli leaders in recent history. I was assigned the task to become an expert on a recent general who became prime minister, Ariel Sharon. As I read Sharon’s speeches, it occurred to me that even though he wasn’t a spiritually practicing Jew, every speech he gave included references to “The land God gave to the people of Israel.”

Now think about the timetable for the arrival of Jesus. The Pharisees (the religious leaders of those waiting for the Messiah), had lost their spiritual compass and got wrapped up in customs and traditions. They practiced religion but were not spiritual. In addition, the Roman Empire took over this land — this very land which God promised to His people, the Jews!

How would you like it if some hated enemy took over your country? The Romans had an army that would scare anyone. They were often heartless, cruel soldiers. After all, their claim to fame was that they invented crucifixion, the most horrible way to kill anyone.

Add to that the reality that these foreign intruders taxed people heavily. They took money from the people of God to line the pockets of leaders in Rome, make weapons, pay soldiers, and take over more countries by force. They did this so they could tax more people, and they succeeded to rule much of the Mediterranean world. What a horrible time. Talk about hopeless!

Someone has said:

You can survive a month without food.

You can survive a few days without water.

You can survive a few minutes without air.

But you can't survive a second without hope.

The Expansion of the Early Church

The Mediterranean world into which Jesus was born was a vacuum of hopelessness. No wonder, for believers, the promised Messiah was Good News! No wonder the apostles, in many of their letters to the churches, described Jesus as “our hope,” and “the hope of the world,” and “the living hope who lives because of the Resurrection” (1 Peter 1:3). The Apostle Paul wrote that even in “suffering, we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces *hope*, and *hope* does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Romans 5:2-7, emphasis mine).

Where there is no hope in the future, there is no power in the present. But Jesus provided hope and filled that vacuum: He is our hope for the future, and that provides power for the present.

No wonder Christianity spread so rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world! Hopeless people were primed for the hope that only Jesus Christ can give. The promise of forgiveness, new life, eternal life, peace that is beyond human understanding, love that knows no

TEN GUIDELINES ABOUT HOPE

1. As a Christian, be careful to avoid an attitude about your church that sounds like God is hopelessly unable to accomplish...whatever.
2. Pessimism about what God can do is the heresy that God is a God of scarcity, rather than the God of abundance. Read Hebrews 11. Then read Hebrews 12:1-2.
3. Be ready, at all times, to share the hope that you have inside: Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:15).
4. When people far from God express hopelessness, consider it a sign of receptivity—an invitation for you to share your “God stories,” what God has done in your life.
5. Some people “hope to win the lottery.” As a believer, you have a living hope much greater. You should share it every chance you get.
6. No one *enjoys* a society that has reached a high level of pessimism, as researchers have reported concerning the state of thinking in the United States and some other nations. Look at the “upside”: when people are hopeless, it signals a great opportunity to point them to Jesus. They are receptive!
7. As a Christian, you are a guardian and spokesperson for a hope that overcomes anything this world dishes out. When you see a nonbeliever in hopelessness, speak of the hope of Christ as your real, measurable source of strength and endurance.
8. When you see fellow Christians acting hopeless, don’t criticize or write them off. Point to Christ, who is the Source of hope.
9. In times when the media reflects massive hopelessness, or personal challenges overwhelm, ask God for courage. Read Joshua 1:9, where God says, “Be strong and courageous, for I am with you.” And He is!
10. Remember: when things are at their worst, God is at His best, especially if Christians will shine the light that pierces the darkness.

boundaries: everything Jesus does, everything Jesus is, brings hope to the present because it instills hope for the future.

Leaders know the power of hope. Napoleon was a conqueror. He said, “Leaders are dealers in hope.” John F. Kennedy, during the Cold War, in fear of communist aggression, led a nation in which many families were building bomb shelters — including mine. Kennedy said, “We should not let our fears hold our hopes back.”

Call to Action

Have you ever witnessed a massive revival, where people are becoming Christians at a rate unexplainable by human calculation? I’ve seen it in Nigeria, where corrupt leaders robbed the people of hope, but Christ followers rose up to boldly proclaim real hope that gives “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding...” (Philippians 4:7).

I’ve seen it in Russia, during the fall of communism, as young people were released from jail, where they were held for openly sharing faith in Jesus Christ. These young adults had new freedom, and they were planting churches in rented movie theaters by the thousands.

I’ve seen it most recently in England, where the rise of secularization peaked about 25 years ago — and the church was nearly extinct. I’ve seen old cathedrals in London — closed for decades because no one attended — reopened with vibrant worship and wall-to-wall young people. I’ve seen little churches in England started in coffee shops and in pubs. I’ve seen Christians reaching out in the worst and most dangerous areas of industrial cities, like Manchester. Manchester was the site of the Industrial Revolution and today looks like Detroit or Chicago on steroids. I’ve seen people of all ages, even former criminals, now on fire for Christ.

I’ve seen it most recently in Hot Springs, Arkansas, where a church of a mainline denomination reaches people churches don’t usually reach: people coming out of addictions, broken families, broken lives. I’ve watched 40 baptisms take place in that church on a single Sunday. That church baptizes about that same number of people four times a year! I’ve seen whole families baptized, old men, young people, 20-somethings, some with arms tattooed from one end to the other, sold out to Jesus Christ and bringing their friends.

Any church can revisit their strategies – look to the harvest that is ripe in a season of human hopelessness without Christ. Your church can do this. God wants this. The world, the nation, desperately needs this. Where Christ lives in hearts, divine hope abounds. Where churches refuse to retool, hopelessness destroys: people, cities, nations.

If you have the hope of Christ in your heart, you have power in the present. You have the power to retool your church. By the power of Christ in you, you have the power to reshape the world, one person at a time. I am certain that the Lord of hope will **not** force you to do this. Yet, it is clear, the hopelessness of this world has ripened the harvest. It is without question: the God of hope hopes you will seize the moment and do whatever it takes. We’ve seen many churches do this. Will yours be next?

KEY RESOURCES

Church Doctor Ministries. *Reaching the Unchurched Workshop*.
www.churchdoctor.org.

Comfort, Ray. *God Speaks: Finding Hope in the Midst of Hopelessness: Life Lessons from the Book of Job*. Nashville, TN: Regal Books, 2013.

Johnston, Ray. *The Hope Quotient: Measure It, Raise It, You'll Never Be the Same*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2014.

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Hope: Looking Ahead with Confidence and Courage*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015.