What Is Pragmatism & Why Is It Bad?
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: QA209

John MacArthur

In a column published some years ago in a popular Christian magazine, a well-known preacher was venting his own *loathing* for long sermons. January 1 was coming, so he resolved to do better in the coming year. "That means wasting less time listening to long sermons and spending much more time preparing short ones," he wrote. "People, I've discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out before noon."[1]

Unfortunately, that perfectly sums up the predominant attitude behind much of ministry today. *Bad doctrine is tolerable; a long sermon most certainly is not.* The timing of the benediction is of far more concern to the average churchgoer than the content of the sermon. Sunday dinner and the feeding of our mouths takes precedence over Sunday school and the nourishment of our souls. Long-windedness has become a greater sin than heresy. The church has imbibed the worldly philosophy of pragmatism, and we're just beginning to taste the bitter results.

What Is Pragmatism?

Pragmatism is the notion that meaning or worth is determined by practical consequences. It is closely akin to *utilitarianism*, the belief that usefulness is the standard of what is good. To a pragmatist/utilitarian, if a technique or course of action has the desired effect, it is good. If it doesn't seem to work, it must be wrong.

Pragmatism as a philosophy was developed and popularized at the end of the last century by philosopher William James, along with such other noted intellectuals as John Dewey and George Santayana. It was James who gave the new philosophy its name and shape. In 1907, he published a collection of lectures entitled *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, and thus defined a whole new approach to truth and life.

Pragmatism has roots in Darwinism and secular humanism. It is inherently relativistic, rejecting the notion of absolute right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error. Pragmatism ultimately defines truth as that which is useful, meaningful, helpful. Ideas that don't seem workable or relevant are rejected as false.

What's wrong with pragmatism?

After all, common sense involves a measure of legitimate pragmatism, doesn't it? If a dripping faucet works fine after you replace the washers, for example, it is reasonable to assume that bad washers were the problem. If the medicine your doctor prescribes produces harmful side effects or has no effect at all, you need to ask if there's a remedy that works. Such simple pragmatic realities are generally self-evident.

But when pragmatism is used to make judgments about right and wrong, or when it becomes a guiding philosophy of life and ministry, it inevitably clashes with Scripture. Spiritual and biblical truth is not determined by testing what "works" and what doesn't. We know from Scripture, for example, that the gospel often does not produce a positive response (1 Cor. 1:22, 23; 2:14). On the other hand, Satanic lies and deception can be quite effective (Matt. 24:23, 24; 2 Cor. 4:3, 4). Majority reaction is no test of validity (cf. Matt. 7:13, 14), and prosperity is no measure of truthfulness (cf. Job 12:6). Pragmatism as a guiding philosophy of ministry is inherently flawed. Pragmatism as a test of truth is nothing short of satanic.

Nevertheless, an overpowering surge of ardent pragmatism is sweeping through evangelicalism. Traditional methodology—most notably preaching—is being discarded or downplayed in favor of newer means, such as drama, dance, comedy, variety, side-show histrionics, pop-psychology, and other entertainment forms. The new methods supposedly are more "effective"—that is, they draw a bigger crowd. And since the chief criterion for gauging the success of a church has become attendance figures, whatever pulls in the most people is accepted without further analysis as *good*. That is pragmatism.

Perhaps the most visible signs of pragmatism are seen in the convulsive changes that have revolutionized the church worship service in the past two decades. Some of evangelicalism's largest and most influential churches now boast Sunday services that are designed purposely to be more rollicking than reverent.

Even worse, *theology* now takes a back seat to *methodology*. One author has written, "Formerly, a doctrinal statement represented the reason for a denomination's existence. Today, methodology is the glue that holds churches together. A statement of ministry defines them and their denominational existence."[2] Incredibly, many believe this is a positive trend, a major advance for the contemporary church.

Some church leaders evidently think the four priorities of the early church—the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42)—make a lame agenda for the church in this day and age. Churches are allowing drama, recreation, entertainment, self-help programs, and similar

enterprises to eclipse the importance of traditional Sunday worship and fellowship. In fact, everything seems to be in fashion in the church today *except* biblical preaching. The new pragmatism sees preaching—particularly expository preaching—as pass,. Plainly declaring the truth of God's Word is regarded as offensive and utterly ineffective. We're now told we can get better results by first amusing people or giving them pop-psychology and thus wooing them into the fold. Once they feel comfortable, they'll be ready to receive biblical truth in small, diluted doses.

Pastors are turning to books on marketing methods in search of new techniques to help churches grow. Many seminaries have shifted their pastoral training emphasis from Bible curriculum and theology to counseling technique and church-growth theory. All these trends reflect the church's growing commitment to pragmatism.

Notes: * This article is excerpted from *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993).

1. Jamie Buckingham, "Wasted Time," *Charisma* (Dec. 88), 98.
2. Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 249.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).