

Fresh Start

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A Most Unusual Window

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Researchers have used many different tools to try to measure and define cultural and societal changes in America over the past two hundred years. Perhaps none were more innovative than Janice Hume. For her book *Obituaries in American Culture*, she surveyed more than 8,000 newspaper obituaries from 1818 to 1930. She discovered that what newspapers write about someone after their death reveals a lot about our culture.

An online summary of the book says “it shows how, in memorializing individual citizens, obituaries make a public expression of our values. Far from being staid or morbid, these death notices offer a lively look at a changing America. Indeed, obits are little windows through which to view America’s cultural history.” Hume reports many interesting findings, but I find one particularly fascinating. In the nineteenth century, obituaries written by newspapers (not submitted by families) tended to focus on a person’s character. In the twentieth century, that focus shifted to a person’s work and wealth. In other words, the focus shifted from what kind of person the deceased was to what they accomplished in life.

I think this is a critically important observation for Christ-followers. We are taught that while we live in this world we are not to be of this world. *Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* 1 John 2:15. Paul makes the same point in Romans 12:2-- *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Hume’s research seems to tell us what you may have already suspected. In the last 100 years, American society has come to put an increasingly greater premium on success and accomplishments in this world; that is, a higher premium on conforming to the ways of this world. So, how can this knowledge help us in our faith journey?

Recognize that it’s not your imagination; culture’s gravitational pull away from who God wants us to be is indeed increasing. This world values character less, and wealth, success, and fame more than it did two centuries ago. But also understand that God’s expectation for us hasn’t changed, despite the continually increasing challenge we face. J. Warner puts it this way:

“Paul was right when he said that we would have to leave the world altogether if we wanted to truly separate ourselves from immoral, “worldly” people. That’s not what God is asking us to do. The fact that you might be in a location where your Christian worldview is being challenged is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, God may have placed you there so you can have a positive impact on those who don’t yet know Jesus, or at least learn more about the culture so you can influence it later.”

Yes, being “in this world but not of this world” appears to be a growing challenge for us. But not for God. He is the same size He’s always been; big enough to defeat any worldly challenge even when we aren’t. When we as Christ-followers remember that, the challenge will actually appear to shrink.