

(This sermon is from our *Core Values of the Church Series*)

CULTURAL RELEVANCE

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

INTRODUCTION:

- READ TEXT

Mark Twain said, "The only person who likes change is a wet baby." That might be a bit of an exaggeration, but from my own observation, most people have some hesitancy toward change. Change takes us out of our comfort zone, it doesn't allow us to relax, it doesn't give us the assurance in life we long for.

Those who have reached the age of 100 have seen radical change in their lifetime:

*They are unexpected witnesses to an era that brought forth Band-Aids and penicillin, Kellogg's Corn Flakes and Camel cigarettes, the World Series and Reader's Digest, jazz and the theory of relativity.

*They remember not just when man landed on the moon but when he first soared into the sky.

*They remember the terrifying toll of the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918 and the wrenching despair on the soup lines of the Great Depression.

*The last century opened with the first telegraph message being sent across the Atlantic and concluded with millions of e-mail messages being sent around the world everyday.

The moral climate has also seen radical change. 50 years ago, who would have believed we would have abortion on demand, legalized homosexual marriage in some states, physician assisted suicide, open nudity on TV, that performers like *Madonna*, and talk show personalities like *Howard Stern* would not only be tolerated, but admired and adored? Who would have ever guessed that these types of changes would take place?

Even though we are uncomfortable, and should be uncomfortable, with many of the changes in our culture, we must also understand that this is the culture we have been called to minister to. This is our world, and God has placed us here for such a time as this. We have been called to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of this generation. If we are going to do that, and if we are going to do it effectively, we must take Paul's example as our own, and present the message of Christ in a culturally relevant fashion.

Our Core Value states: ***We believe the church should be culturally relevant while remaining doctrinally pure.***

Transition: Before we examine some specifics concerning cultural relevancy let's consider some things that never change.

1. SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

I am well aware that some are uncomfortable with the subject matter this morning. I am also aware that it is very easy to be misunderstood when talking about something like cultural relevance. So I want you to be assured that we are not talking about political correctness, or about watering down the gospel, or anything of that nature. And I believe it is important for us to realize that some things will never change at (NAME OF CHURCH) or in our Christian lives:

1) Jesus

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8)

In a world of constant change it is good to know that Jesus Christ is always the same -- that He is always here for us -- that He will always love us -- that His sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection from the dead will always be sufficient. Jesus' sameness yesterday, today, and forever is a comfort in this day and gives us a rock solid foundation regardless of the changes in our culture.

2) The Bible

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8)

"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." (1 Pet. 1:23)

The Word of God stands for all time as a revelation from God's mouth to our ears. It will never change, and it will never take second place in this church. The Word of God is where we get our directives for worship, for our lifestyle choices, for practical instruction, for our salvation. This will never change.

3) Divine Principles

Titus 1:9 is an instruction for those who will hold leadership positions in the church and it says that those who hold these positions, "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." The doctrinal truth taught in the Bible does not change and anyone who tries to change it or water it down or take it away from the pulpit or church classroom will be refuted from the Word of God and taken away from a position in leadership. God's truth and the divine principles He has given us do not and will not change.

4) Spiritual Needs

In every generation that has ever lived, people have hungered for spiritual truth. We have sought a life-giving word from God and we have found it in the church of Jesus Christ. When Paul preached to the scholars of Athens he said concerning God, "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. *God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*" (Acts 17:26-27) Paul was preaching to spiritual seekers and making it clear to them that God was seeking them also.

In Romans 2:7 we find that those who "seek glory, honor and immortality" will be given "eternal life". Hebrews 11:6 informs us that God rewards those who "earnestly seek Him."

It is a biblical fact that we will always have spiritual seekers among us -- this will never change -- nor will our attempts to reach those seekers with the Gospel.

Transition: The 2nd truth we need to understand this morning is that while these things I've mentioned will never change...

2. SOME THINGS ALWAYS DO

A. We change as we grow older.

Hopefully we get wiser, more mature, and are able to have better discernment as we age. We change physically, don't we? Someone said, "There are four signs of approaching age: baldness, bifocals, bridges, and bulges!" Someone else said, "The average life span of a woman is constantly increasing, thus enabling her to stay twenty-nine much longer."

B. The ethnic make up of our culture is changing.

The Caucasian population is at zero population growth, while the African American, Hispanic, and Asian populations in our country are experiencing double digit expansion. In fact, by 2050 only half of the nation's population will be Caucasian. The concept of multiculturalism will be increasingly significant in our language, customs, values, relationships, and processes. Unfortunately, the Church has not kept pace with society. More than 30 years ago Martin Luther King noted that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning was the most segregated hour of the week, his observation is still accurate. How will we reach out and minister to the different ethnic groups in our culture?

C. There are also radical shifts in the way our culture views itself and processes information.

Erwin McManus' research has shown several significant shifts in our culture in this regard: Let me summarize them for you...

- 1) From a Christian world-view to pluralistic world-views.
- 2) From Western influence to Eastern influence.
- 3) From One Dominant cultural group to multicultural
- 4) From Suburbs to Cities
- 5) From Words/Books to Images/Films

These are just some of the sweeping and radical changes that are transforming the context in which the church must minister.

D. The church has always adapted ministry and methods to the culture in which they lived.

While Jesus, the Bible, Divine Principles, and Spiritual Needs will always be with us and do not change, many other things are in a constant state of flux. Worship styles, technology, outreach methods, teaching styles, and much more, are always being adapted to reach those who are unchurched, as well as to disciple those who are already Christ followers.

*Jesus preached from a boat at the Sea of Galilee, creating a natural amphitheatre -- I use a lapel mike.

*Paul wrote on papyrus with a quill and ink -- this week I used Microsoft Word 2000 on a Pentium computer system.

*The early church studied from the scrolls and parchments -- we have dozens of translations bound together in our choice of bindings and colors, and Bibles on computer where we can look up Scripture in milliseconds.

*Paul wore a Toga while he was preaching -- aren't you glad I don't!

The church cannot minister to the people of this millennium with methodology designed to reach the people of 1950. And God doesn't want us to.

E. The very first verse of the Bible tells us that God is a God of change.

"In the beginning, God created..." -- God is Creator, and He is not happy when His church tries to stop His creativity.

Once an American pastor went to see one of the new church members in the hospital. The hospital patient had recently arrived from China and could not speak English. When the pastor arrived at the hospital, he took hold of the man's hand and had prayer with him. As he finished his prayer the patient began to shout something in Chinese. The pastor didn't understand what he was saying, and the man continued in vain to communicate something to him. But the pastor could not understand Chinese. - Within a few moments the patient made one last attempt to communicate, gasped for air, and then he died. The pastor was called to preach the man's funeral. During visitation the pastor repeated the phrase the man had been shouting to one of the man's relatives to see if he knew what the man's last words might be. The relative listened and then gave the interpretation: "Move over, you're standing on my oxygen tube, I can't breathe!

I think an analogy can be made between this story and the modern church. We, like the pastor, are capable of sucking the life out of the ministry God has called us to. God wants to breathe new life into His church, He wants to minister with all of His creativity and power, but many in the church refuse to change their methodologies because they are worshipping their tradition.

Lest you think I am against tradition, let me state that I categorically am not. What I am against is traditionalism. Tradition values the past and the way God has moved in history. It has the ability to embrace God's movements in both past and future. Traditionalism embraces only what has gone before -- it puts God in a box and tries to trap Him and tell Him what is and is not acceptable.

When I read through the Bible I find verses that tell me about a "new song", "a new heavens and earth", "new wine", "new life", "new covenant", "new creation", "new man", and a "new command." Our God is a God of change, and He calls the Church to be willing to change with Him.

Transition: So we see that some things never change, and that some things always do, now let's consider:

3. SOME WAYS TO MEET THE CHALLENGE

What is the challenge? *"We must minister to our culture without compromising our message."* Let's try to tie this all together with four ways we can answer this challenge:

1) Obtain a Biblical Worldview

A worldview is quite simply the lenses through which we see our world. Whether you realize it or not, we all have a worldview. What we need to do is make sure our worldview is in line with the Bible's.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28)

If we are going to see people through Jesus' eyes, if we are to have His worldview, we will not base our feelings and attitudes on a person's skin color, their nationality, their language, or their social status. We will love everyone as God's special creation.

"Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth--to every nation, tribe, language and people" (Rev. 14:6)

The gospel is for all people at all times. Not only do we love these people as God's children, we embrace them as equals.

2) Embrace New Methodologies

The Pharisees approached Jesus and wondered why His disciples weren't fasting -- why they weren't keeping the Law. Jesus responded in Mark 2:21-22 *"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."*

These two brief parables of the old garment and old wineskins illustrate the incompatibility of the old system of Jewish law and tradition with the new cloth and new wine of the gospel of Christ. Jesus was always being questioned about the different methods He used. Jesus embraced what was new and effective for ministry. Jesus was the Master of presenting truth in the language of His culture. He used objects, seeds, soil, situational parables, coins, camels, fig trees -- all things that his audiences could readily identify with. And much of the methodology we will employ will do the same thing -- whether it be drama, video, art, music, or stories, they will be used to present the gospel in ways that our culture can identify with.

3) Be Creative in Worship

Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints. (Psalms 149:1)

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9)

God wants His church to sing a new song -- He wants us to creatively worship Him in our assemblies. This in no way means that we cannot continue praising God with the grand old hymns, but neither does it mean we can shut out the new songs God is calling His people to sing. This is not an either/or situation, it is a both/and situation.

4) Practice the Art of Becoming

- READ 1 Cor. 9:19-23

To follow Paul's example is not easy -- in fact, it does not come naturally, it only comes supernaturally. We can only adapt to, and minister to our culture, when we make an absolute commitment to it, as did Paul. We are not talking about compromising biblical truth, but being flexible in our approach to both evangelism and ministry.

CONCLUSION:

In 1865 an editorial in the Boston Post read, "Well-informed people know it is impossible to transmit their voices over wires, and even if it were possible, the thing would not have practical value."

*In 1897 Lord Kelvin said, "Radio has no future."

*Thomas Watson, Chairman of IBM in 1943 said, "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."

*Ken Olson, President of Digital Equipment Corporation stated in 1977, "There is no reason why anyone would want a computer in their home."

While I'm sure these were all fine men, they were not visionaries and they did not understand the changes that were to come to their world. As the church, let us not make the same mistake that they did. Our culture is radically changing before our very eyes, let's be ready for it, with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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