

## On Being Culturally Relevant

**“I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.”** 1 Corinthians 9:22 NAS

For years I have heard people talking about how the church needs to be culturally relevant. They used as the Scriptural basis Paul’s words to the Corinthians; **“To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.”** 1 Corinthians 9:22

Yes, that made sense. Communicating often requires each person trying to understand the perspective of others and then making a point within the context of that perspective.

What has and continues to disturb me is the manner in which congregations define “cultural relevance.” For example, in the name of cultural relevance The Church has been torn apart over the debate about music styles. Some congregations have completely split over the argument between the use of hymns and the use of contemporary music. Some have opted to have two different congregations, one worshipping with hymns, the other with contemporary music. Other congregations have decided they will be a congregation which just does hymns or just does contemporary. Others try to blend the two types of music and strike a balance. As hard as the battle over music has been it would not be all that bad if it were the only sacrifice made in the name of cultural relevance.

### Worship

The entire concept of Christian worship has gone through a metamorphous. The worship service, the focus of which should be to worship God in spirit and truth (**John 4:23-24**), has become, instead, a well orchestrated, finely tuned, highly structured performance. Don’t believe me? See what happens if you: let the pastor speak an extra five minutes, change the order of service, adding a prayer or taking away a song. In most congregations the reaction is similar to if you sacrificed a cow in the sanctuary. Not well accepted would be a mild way of putting it.

In the name of cultural relevance, sermons have taken a hit as well. They have been made shorter, topical and less “offensive.” What would God say through His servant, the pastor, on a given Sunday morning? Whatever it is, it better fit within the schedule. And if the singing, praying, baby dedications or music specials take up too much time he better be willing to cut it short so people can get out “on time.” The time of allowing the pastor to be Spirit led in his message, even if he spoke for an hour, maybe two, at the leading of God’s Spirit within him, are dead and gone in the American Christian Church.

Many would say preaching The Word of God verse by verse, passage by passage is not culturally relevant. Most people don’t read the Bible, don’t understand the Bible and just want to know what it says about their situation, so going verse by verse would be a waste of time for them. How do **I** make **my** marriage better? How do **I** impact **my** workplace? How do **I** raise **my** kids? How do **I** become a success? How will the church help **me** with **my** problems? What do **I** need to do if **I** am depressed?

In the “culturally sensitive” era of the church, sermons must not be harsh, but gentle. They must be focused on the “seeker” who is sensitive and skittish. After all, you don’t want to be

responsible for them rejecting Christ! Therefore, sin is often referred to as mistakes; the blood of Christ, Hell and God's wrath are seldom, if ever, culturally appropriate topics of sermons.

### Ministry

The entire concept of Christian "ministry" has also gone through a metamorphous. Christian ministry use to be an integral part of community. Social issues such as moral behavior and social well being within a community were a part of Christian ministry. The church dealt directly with those who were widows and orphans, those who were destitute and those who were derelict. Many of the social issues under the guise of Federal, State and local responsibility were once the normal business of the church, and rightly so.

The church has abdicated the responsibility God has given her for the social needs of the community to the government. Where does a person turn when they get into trouble financially? The government. Where does a person turn when they run into medical bills threatening to sink them financially? The government (after their insurance has been exhausted.) Who does the single mom turn to for help? The government. Who takes care of the widows and orphans? The government. Upon whom do people rely for their Social Security? The government. Too many congregations address the surface needs of an individual. Too few really know the needs, temporal or spiritual, of their congregants.

The American Christian Church is a nominal foul-weather friend. If you need a hundred bucks here or there they might be able to help. Long-term help or pre-disaster\_help, financial, moral or spiritual is next to non-existent. Meeting the needs that unemployment insurance, social security, welfare and long-term disability cover is no longer a part of Christian ministry.

Is this the cultural relevance of which Paul was speaking in [1 Corinthians 9:22](#)?

### Culture

Let's start with dictionary definitions, shall we? The *Encarta® World English Dictionary* defines culture as:

1. Shared beliefs and values of a group: the beliefs, customs, practices and social behavior of a particular nation or people.
2. People with shared beliefs and practices
3. Shared attitudes: a particular set of attitudes that characterizes a group of people.

### Relevance

The same dictionary defines relevance:

1. The sensible or logical connection that one thing has with another
2. Applicability to current issues: applicability to or connection with real-world issues, present-day events, or the current state of society

### Cultural Relevance

Combining the two definitions gives us cultural relevance: acknowledging the shared beliefs and values of a group of people and applying or connecting said beliefs and values to present-day events or the current state of society. Although that is a mouthful to say, it is descriptive enough for us to look to the Bible and see if it has anything to do with the Christian life.

## Looking to Christ

Christ is our example for all things. Would His ministry fit into the parameters of our definition of being culturally relevant?

He fed the poor, healed the sick, raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, voice to the mute and wholeness to the demon possessed, the lame and the leper.

He taught the religious leaders even though they thought they were above being taught. He provided principles for marriage, parenting, divorce, adultery, how to handle money, the importance of righteousness as it compares to temporal things and how to get to heaven.

He taught leadership principles to the common man. He established, by His example, The Church which has impacted the whole of history and any foreseeable or contemplative future.

Through His life, His teaching, His death and resurrection He established an eternal relationship between God and man.

I believe, by this brief overview of His life, we can safely say the life and ministry of Jesus was culturally relevant. We can also say, without the least stretch of the truth that it is and will continue to be culturally relevant until the end of the world.

By the example of Christ, therefore, The Church should be relevant to the culture in which they live.

## Which Culture!

There is a significant difference between the cultural relevance of Jesus and the cultural relevance of the American Christian church.

The Culture of Christ is defined by WHO one is In Christ. Christ's culture is clearly presented throughout the Bible but specifically in the New Testament. The parameters for the Culture of Christ never change for it is based on Truth. The relationship of one person to another is defined by WHO God has made one to be in the life of that person. The purpose of the Culture of Christ is to glorify God.

The Culture of the world is defined by what one DOES. The "politically correct" or "socially acceptable" culture varies on the mood of the culture at the moment. The parameters of the culture of the world changes day by day. What was right yesterday could be offensive today or tomorrow. Relationships are defined by what seems right to the individual and whether it is broadly accepted by society. This is sometimes measured retrospectively. The purpose of the Culture of the world is for everyone to get along, to be tolerant and to live in unity.

The American Christian church has not been faithful to the Culture of Christ, but to the culture of the world around them. Too often the church has sought friendship with the world rather than obedience to God. The two do not mix (**James 4:4**).

The Church should be bringing the Culture of Christ, the beliefs and values, customs, practices and social behavior, to the world in the same way Christ did, by example. Instead, the

church growth movement has been changing the method and ministry of the church to reflect the world, and its beliefs and values, in an attempt to make the church “friendly” for non-Christians.

Christ has addressed every need of mankind, Christian and non-Christian without losing sight of His role and responsibility in the world as defined by The Father because He kept His focus on The Father. Over the next several issues of In Focus we will be looking at the Culture of Christ and its relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In doing so, we will be defining the ministry of The Church in a culture of darkness and the way in which living in the Culture of Christ will bring light to that darkened world.

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