

## Silverdale Baptist Church and Our Culture

Sometimes people ask us questions or make statements about all the changes that our church has undergone. Such as:

- The church sanctuary doesn't look like a Church.
- People at church are dressing more and more casual.
- The worship service feels more like a concert than reverent worship toward God.
- Why do you use movie and TV video clips? Isn't God's Word enough?

Each of these statements reflects the tension that exists between our Christian experience in the past and our desire to reach our present day culture. The assumption is that the same methods and styles that were used to reach us should be sufficient to reach this generation as well. Yet 4000 churches close their doors every year that prove the opposite. Each of them once had a heyday of effectiveness in reaching their community, but today those churches are gone. Why? Because they were unwilling to change.

Let me explain our philosophy about making changes to reach our culture. First and foremost we believe that **the Gospel never changes**. We believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that He was buried and that He was raised from the dead. (1 Cor. 15:1-3). We also believe that repentance and faith are our responses to the Gospel. (See article – Is Believing In Christ Enough?) The Gospel is nonnegotiable and will never change. No matter what changes in our society, we can never compromise the Gospel. (Gal. 1:6-8)

However, the **methods must always change**. The methods and approaches that we use to present the Gospel must always change. That means that we must contextualize the Gospel for every culture. **The substance of the Gospel can never change but the style presenting the gospel must change**. Some will say, isn't that compromise? No, it's not compromise. We're not changing the message. We're changing the methodology so that it is culturally accessible.

The fact is our church is living in an ever-changing culture. And we only have 3 options on how we can respond to this changing culture.

1. **We can Retreat from the Culture.** We can give up on reaching our pagan society and become isolationists. Like the Amish we can isolate ourselves and remove ourselves from this corrupt and changing society.

2. **We can Conform to the Culture.** Some Christians and churches have conformed so much to the world that literally, you can't tell the difference between them and the world. And often when we go down this path we start compromising the Gospel itself.

3. **We Can Utilize The Culture.** We can take as much of our culture as possible and adapt and utilize it to reach others for Christ. We don't accept everything the culture does, but use as much of the culture as possible to make the Gospel accessible and understandable to our culture.

That is what the Apostle Paul did to reach his culture. <sup>20</sup> *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law ... so as to win those under the law.* <sup>21</sup> *To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, ... so as to win those not having the law.* <sup>22</sup> *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that **by all possible means** I might save some.* (1 Cor. 9:20-22, NIV 1984)

We have a biblical example of Paul using all possible means to bring the Gospel to people. In the book of Acts, Paul is speaking to a group of well-educated philosophers in Athens. This audience didn't know any Scripture, so Paul used a pagan altar and quoted from their poets. <sup>22</sup> *Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.* <sup>23</sup> *For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, **I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.** So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you ...* <sup>28</sup> *'For in him we live and move and have our being. 'As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "* (Acts 17:22-28, NIV). Paul quoted secular philosophers and even used a pagan altar to relate to them and to bring the Gospel to them. Wasn't God's Word enough? Of course it was. However, Paul knew they would be more receptive to the Gospel if he brought it to them in the context of what they already understood. And that is what we seek to do in our church as well.

Now none of you would have a problem with a missionary doing this overseas. We send missionaries overseas and they learn the language and customs of the people they are trying to reach. They start to dress like the nationals. And when they start planting churches, they look at the architecture of that culture and build buildings that fit in. As far as the worship style, they look at the culture and they find music that fits with the culture.

Early on in missions, many missionaries went overseas and tried to push our America culture on the nationals. Their music was out of a hymn book and all their churches were rectangle and all the leaders wore button-up shirts and ties. They found this colonialism type of missions was not successful because there was a disconnect between their life experience and the gospel. The missionary's style then became a distraction to the gospel. Missionaries today now know that they have to be willing to change in order to fit into the culture they are trying to reach.

So, where you are in the world will determine what the style and methods look like. In some places in Africa there are churches that are grass huts with dirt floors and no one is wearing any shoes. And their enthusiastic worship makes our services look docile. Yet these people love Jesus and their worship is sincere. Styles change but the substance of the gospel does not.

It is the same way with the different churches in America. When I visit my wife's parent's church in a small farming community in North Texas, almost every male there is wearing jeans, boots and a cowboy hat. The music is Southern Gospel. When

vacationing in Hawaii, most of the men there wore shorts, Hawaiian shirt and sandals. They even had hula dancers as part of the worship service. Whether it was intentional or not, these different churches had attire and a worship service that was very much like their culture. They all loved Jesus and their worship was sincere. Styles change but the substance of the gospel does not.

Now let's move to Silverdale and the culture of Chattanooga. Our church architecture has now been adapted to reflect what most of the newer facilities built in Chattanooga look like. Today, the church attire of most in attendance reflects the kind of clothing worn on their job during the week. Our society as a whole has become much more casual and that is true in church as well. It is almost funny to look at old pictures of baseball games where every person in the stadium has on a coat and tie. That is not the case anymore. Styles change. Today, our culture is immersed in technology; and as a church we are trying to utilize it as much as possible. In every change we make, our church is simply trying to match as much as we can the culture in which we find ourselves.

The hardest change for most people to make is with their worship style. Music is so personal and we have all had those amazing worship moments with God through the years. So it is hard to set some of our old favorites aside in order to have new music and worship for the younger generation. And this is especially difficult for our church. We have a church that spans all the ages. We have an equal number of people in just about every age group. We have one member that is 100 years old, but we also have a lot of young families and teens. So trying to design a worship experience that reaches all those age ranges at the same time can be difficult. We have tried to maintain what we call a blended worship service. That means that our services have elements that are traditional (choir, an occasional hymn, organ, invitation, public prayer time, expository preaching, and some coats and ties). At the same time we have elements that are more contemporary (praise choruses, lights, drums, louder music and casual dress).

Now in order for this to continue to work, everyone has to compromise some—maybe the older members more than the younger. I heard one Christian leader say, "Trying to have a blended worship service that seeks to minister to all age groups is impossible. All this means is that you have a worship service where no one is really happy." Maybe this is true, but I pray for unity and love to abound in our congregation.

We are always evaluating and re-evaluating our effectiveness in ministering to every age group and at the same time reaching our community. To those of us who already know Christ, we should be willing to change and adapt the most if that change will reach more people with the Gospel. We will never change just for the sake of change, but we will always change in order to be more effective in reaching our community and our culture with the Gospel. Our heart and attitude must be that of the Apostle Paul. *I have become all things to all men so that **by all possible means** I might save some.* (1 Cor. 9:20-22, NIV 1984)