



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **The Church God had in Mind: Return to Sender**

**1 Corinthians 9:19-23**

**by Matt Hook**

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In the first century, a man named Paul planted Christianity across the Roman Empire. The mission hasn't changed. As you and I try to be the church that God had in mind, we need to look at the similar world in which Paul lived.

As we face obstacles today, so did he. Demons infested the culture. There were so many religions that people just picked and chose what they wanted to believe. Even within the churches. The population was hostile to the Good News. The people made fun of the Christians. They accused the believers of being atheists because they did not worship the ordinary gods. Since the Christians met in secret and talked about "feeding on Christ" and loving one another, the pagans accused the Christians of cannibalism and incest.

The world of Paul's day upheld prostitution, sexual immorality, and the killing of infant girls. Paul ministered in a culture that despised his ethic based on love and purity. And though the Jews of Paul's day separated themselves from the rest of the population, they were often bitter enemies of the apostle.

But in spite of this Paul won spiritual victories. Today, as believers in Christ, we have encountered Jesus. When you and I surrender our lives to him, his Holy Spirit comes to live within us to transform us.

The early church connected with the culture, sometimes fought with the culture, and ultimately shaped the culture. Paul and the early Christians penetrated the thinking of the society of their day. In the first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul spells out his strategy. *"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 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. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel; that I may share in its blessings."*

Paul is saying, "I will identify with anyone's way of thinking and anyone's way of living in order to communicate my message. I will do anything short of sinning to win men and women to Jesus Christ."

As Christians in the church today, we are not far from the first century. Most scholars agree: we live in a pre-Christian culture. A majority of men and women in our society have little knowledge of God. Christians are written off as irrelevant, political radicals devoted to bigotry and being unsympathetic to women carrying babies they had not planned. Is it just me, or does the media show us as warped? Have you ever noticed whenever they show a minister or priest that they are always warped, racist, clueless, stupid, dull, or boring? (And always wearing a collar?)

When we weren't looking, the world changed, and we weren't ready for it. Like Paul in the ancient world, we must understand and adjust to the mindset of our neighbors. We must adapt. Not just to win other people to the Savior, but because that's our theology. *That's what God has done for us.*

This past year and a half has been chaotic for us, for our friends, and for the U.S. Postal service. A year ago June we moved to Kentucky, and even though I learned Microsoft Publisher and made a neat Christmas newsletter complete with pictures for my media class, we never mailed it out. (I even changed it to a "Happy Martin Luther King Day newsletter, to no avail). And then we found out God had opened a wide door for effective service to us here in Dexter, we mailed out changes of address cards. But because we neglected to get the Christmas cards out in last year's chaos, we must've missed some addresses. Every week for the last several week, we've gotten one or two cards back, that says "*Return to Sender.*" Somehow, several of our friends had moved, and somehow we'd missed it altogether.

The package delivery business has become a blur of catalogues, trucks, planes, and people crisscrossing the world hundreds of times over. But, as complex as the delivery business is, it still boils down to a surprisingly simple task: picking up a package and asking two questions: where is it going, and how do we get it there?

Today, we are looking at another core value of the "Church that God had in Mind," the value of connecting with people in 2003. We've done our homework. We've become more familiar with Scripture. We've zeroed in more closely on the Gospel message. We've worked at glorifying God in worship. It's the perfect gift.

But the address of the world around us has changed. There have been dramatic shifts in American culture that have nudged the world out of reach of the gift we've tried to package so well.

The world has moved, but it neglected to send a change of address card. We keep delivering the same well-packaged gift to the old address, but no one is home. And it comes back to us: Return to Sender, address unknown.

*"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?"* Paul asks the church in Rome (10:14). *"And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"* (Remember: God *wants* us to preach, and use words if necessary). We could add a third question to Paul's: "And how can they understand if they don't have a clue about what we're saying?"

Hollywood doesn't even try to understand. And thus, they would assume that the church has nothing to say. But Hollywood tells us what it would say, in order to be culturally relevant. The movie *Sister Act* shows both the reluctance of the church to change, and the power of the world to bring the church along, as the nuns move to reach the neighborhood and connect with the people. The world around the convent, and the world around us was clearly shifting. What we couldn't figure out was why it seemed so disconnected from the influence of the Christian faith. If we are honest with ourselves, we realize the world moved, shifting away ever-so-slightly, and we floated along with it. When it hit a point which woke us up to the fact that we were in a place we really didn't want to be, we didn't know how to get back.

The church is no longer the shaper of modern culture, but, in fact, modern culture had become the shaper of the church. The world changed, and we didn't. The world changed for the worse because we didn't change at all. The world changed for the better and we missed it. The world waits for the church to once again become God's agent of change.

When I saw *Sister Act*, I loved what Whoopi Goldberg taught the church. But I missed what Hollywood thought the church could teach Whoopi, even basic things about faith, prayer, and spirituality. At the same time, Hollywood paints a good picture of what the Kingdom of God might look like. But shouldn't we in the church have something to say? Shouldn't we in the church have something to add? Of course we should.

And like the package business, it still boils down to a surprisingly simple task: picking up a package and asking two questions: where is it going, and how do we get it there?

First, picking up the package. What a package! A gift, a present, actually: eternal life through Jesus Christ. Satisfaction and peace of mind. New life. Not guaranteed easy life or happiness or success, but the only thing worth giving your soul. The Christian life is not about finding benefits or a good fit for yourself. It's not about choosing brands of religions to try on and return if they don't fit. It's about submitting to God or denying him. And although there are benefits from following Christ – tangible ways our deepest longings are satisfied – Christianity is not about having our needs met. That is only a fraction of what Christianity means. A decision to follow Christ is about God first, not us. This faith gift thrusts us into a new perspective: that character matters – the substance of who we are; that we are twice loved and twice owned. God made us then bought us at a price; that God cares for our needs; that our money and gifts are not ours, but God's; that we are to be concerned about others and serve those God puts in our lives; that joy is ours, through thick and thin; that we are free to be content; that our focus can be bigger than the things we want to accumulate next. And we worry that what God has to offer the world is irrelevant?! That's the package.

Now, where is it going? Paul says, "to as many people as possible...I become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." It's going to people. To all parts of the world. To all cultures of the world. To all subcultures of the world. And if it goes to people, it goes via relationships. And that means love. We must show love.

We are culturally relevant when we love one another. Jesus prayed that we would be one. Jesus told his followers that the world would know we are his disciples if we have love for one another. The early church was united in heart and mind and held everything in common. But we have confused a personal faith with individual faith.

Alone, you are just one voice with your own brand of religious spirituality. But together, as the church, we become an oasis where those who are searching for genuine love and acceptance can come and be filled and be found.

Jesus doesn't call us to love God and tolerate our neighbor. Many times we think the miracle is to love God. But loving God is the most intelligent thing we can do. It's loving people that's a miracle.

Have you been outside lately? People are incredibly selfish. We, at our core, are extraordinarily self-centered, self-focused, and self-indulgent. We can be irritable, short-tempered, or easily offended and embittered, and I've yet to describe the people who are not Christians! Loving one another is the real miracle. But God loves people, and that's where it's going.

We have the package. We know where it's going. How do we get it there?

1. Form friendships with non-Christians (vs. a ghetto mentality, which isolates us into comfortable Christian fellowship)
2. Be a student of the culture (not only to critique it, but to understand and appreciate areas of truth).
3. Join people in their social activities. (Jesus with sinners)
4. Discuss common cultural interests
5. Find culturally relevant terms for God's truth. Avoid Christian-ese. (The point is not to sell a product! It is to show love to another person who is loved by God, so that they can hear God's invitation to receive Christ.) You may be the only one with the lingo to connect to the people in your workplace.

A lot of us are afraid, because we believe the culturally correct metaphor our society uses to describe humanity's search for God: That we're all on a journey up the mountain, choosing our own paths, but all paths end up in the same place. This is totally inadequate! It paints a picture of God being the old wise man who sits on top of this great mountain in someplace like Tibet, waiting for us to obtain his audience through

our personal achievement. This is opposite of the Bible! The Scriptures tell us that God is the one who has taken the initiative. Being motivated by love, God did not simply come down from a mountain but stepped down from his throne in heaven to walk among us and to create a way to love. Love sent Christ into the world. Love moves God. Even to the point of being culturally relevant. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* (John 3:16). He gave it all to be culturally relevant in order to reach the world with his message. Can we afford not to do the same?

Insights into this sermon gleaned from “Culture Shift” by D. Henderson and “an Unstoppable Force” by Erwin McManus