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THE CHURCH: A REFUGE FOR (NOT FROM) THE WORLD

Scripture: Isaiah 40:9 & 52:7

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The church God had in mind is a church that is *culturally relevant*. **Cultural relevance is not an option!** That's the CORE VALUE we're going to look at this morning.

Getting *1st century* truth (e.g.: the teachings of Jesus, the writings of the New Testament, etc.) into *21st century* language, thought and experience is no small task.

ILLUSTRATION> I heard of one young seminary graduate who may have taken "cultural relevance" a little too far:

He was serving as an intern under an older, experienced pastor. The pastor said: "You know, son, it was a good idea you had to replace the first four pews with plush bucket theater seats. It worked like a charm. The front of the church fills first."

The young pastor-to-be nodded, and the veteran pastor continued: "And you told me a little more beat to the music would bring young people back to church, so I suppose the rock 'n' roll gospel choir you brought in was another good idea. We are packed clear in to the balcony."

"Thank-you, Pastor," answered the young intern. "I am pleased that you are open to the new ideas and ways of the younger generation."

"Well," said the pastor, his expression changing to a frown, "I'm afraid you've gone too far with the drive-thru window for holy communion. And, the bright neon sign that reads *MILLIONS AND MILLIONS SERVED* has got to go." □

Just how do we make the Gospel relevant to our day & age in a world that is highly SECULARIZED? By that I mean a culture in which:

- Religious values have virtually no place in the public square.
 - Religious teaching is discredited; and Christianity is marginalized in the media & the political arena.
- ➤ Religious symbols are being removed from public places (e.g.: 10 Commandments from a courthouse; "under God" from the Pledge).
- Belief in the supernatural makes you "weird", bigoted and narrow-minded.

The surrounding culture has “boxed” us in and positioned the church so that we come off sounding antagonistic, or looking ineffective.

Whereas the church was once a dominant force in American life, now we as Christians are an “alternative community” out on the edges of society.

You could draw a parallel to Bible times. Once we were like the Jewish MONARCHY in the time of David. Now we’re in the time of EXILE. Oh, we haven’t been removed geographically, but we have been spiritually! The question is: How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Let’s turn to Isaiah. He wrote a lot to the People of God (the Israelites) as they went into and came out of captivity. In **Isaiah 40:9**, we read. . .

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God.”

Judah!? Jerusalem!? These are the very cities they had been removed from. This was home territory. Now they are coming back as strangers in their very own land. . .proclaiming their faith. . .singing the Lord’s song. That’s how it is with us.

Here’s another passage in **Isaiah 52:7**. It reads. . .

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings good tidings, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

That’s our song! That’s our message! But how do we get it across? How do we say it so that it is heard? Don’t we have to identify with the culture we are seeking to reach? We can’t become “so other-worldly that we are of no earthly use”, as the old-timers used to say.

People have gone back-n-forth on this one for ages:

➤ Some say if we don’t identify, then the church is in danger of becoming a “*museum church*” rather than a “*missional church*”. . .*an 8-track church in a DVD world.*

➤ Others say if we do identify, we run the risk of losing our distinctiveness. . .our identity as the called out people of God. . .a people called to be separate & holy. [That’s what the Israelites did over & over again throughout the Old Testament.]

It’s a tricky balance, a juggling act: being “culturally relevant”. . . without sacrificing the core of who we are in Christ. The answer is NOT to avoid identification (on one extreme). . .NOR to over-identify (on the other extreme).

If you think of the surrounding secular world (culture) we live & work & raise our children in as a gigantic swimming pool: *Avoidance* means to not swim at all; *Over-identification* means to become over-immersed until we drown. Neither is desirable.

What we have to do is live out Kingdom values in front of a watching world with grace & courage.

So, to be “culturally relevant” does not mean to be like the world, but to live unto God in such a way that the world is attracted to Him. It means to be *in the world*, but *not of the world*.

Jesus prayed for His disciples & followers (i.e.: the Church) in **John 17:15**: “My prayer is **not** that you take them out of the world **but** that you protect them from the evil one.”

Last week, my son Ben quoted a verse from **I Corinthians 9** in which Paul says:

“I have become all things to all so that by all possible means some might be saved.”

Does that mean that we become druggies to win some drug addicts? By no means!

There’s a diagram in our **Stephen Ministry Training Manual** called “*The Mud Hole*”. It depicts someone struggling with a life issue as being down in a pit, unable to get out by himself. The Stephen Minister (called a “caregiver”) can stand off to the side and sympathize—which doesn’t help. [That’s *avoidance*.] Or he can get all the way down into the pit and get stuck himself—which doesn’t do anybody any good. [That’s *over-identification*.] Or, as the diagram shows, he can grab hold of something with roots that will hold him (e.g.: referring to our being rooted and grounded in Christ and the Bible) and reach out a hand to help the person stuck.

Let’s listen to that *First Corinthians* passage again in its fuller form, as it reads in *The Message*:

¹⁹*Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: ²⁰religious, nonreligious, ²¹meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, ²²the defeated, the demoralized--whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ--but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a life with God.*

How will we reach secular people? How will we stay culturally relevant without sacrificing the truths of the ancient Gospel message of salvation? How will we be effective in our world?

1. Remain committed to a faith that is *revealed* not *imagined*. GOD has revealed Himself to us; we (or an “enlightened group of people”) didn’t make up all this.
2. Stay grounded in the Scripture. The Bible must be at the center of our life.
3. Be disciplined and expectant in prayer. Remain wholeheartedly dependent on God.
4. Maintain close contact with lost (secular) people. Get to know them. . .like them. . . understand them (their questions, doubts, struggles). . .show them compassion.
5. Be obedient to the Great Commission. We are not a social service agency! Making disciples is the driving force behind everything we do.
6. Receive people where they are, not where we would like them to be. Welcome them. . . take them in. . .absorb them into the fabric of “who we are” here at DUMC.

Know this: Cultural Relevance is going to involve **CHANGE**.

We must recognize that the church is all about change: Changed lives! Transformed culture! But in order for that to happen, the church itself will be constantly changing and adapting.

Look at us: new worship times. . .two distinctly different worship services. . .multiple small groups (for Christian community), with more to come. . .multiple opportunities to serve (we’re anything but clergy-dominated). My, the changes that have come about since I’ve been here (4 years now). . .and since Matt has come (1 year ago). Those of you who have been around awhile can remember the white frame structure on Central. The changes you have lived through are probably too numerous to mention!

In seminary, we were taught the first law of pastoral care: *CHANGE IS ALWAYS EXPERIENCED AS LOSS*. Even when it is gain, it feels like loss.

For example, when my kids grew up & left home, we were looking forward to having more room around the house, less mess, and more flexibility with our income. All that happened, but I also experienced the loss of something very precious.

[Another example] Years ago, my grandfather used to take me to the Nazarene campgrounds in central Ohio, where they had evangelistic services much like a Billy Graham crusade. These services were held in a big old building called a “tabernacle” (because the presence and glory of God was felt so frequently in those services). Well, the time came when they had to tear the old tabernacle down (else it was going to *fall* down) and build another one. To his dying day, my grandfather claimed he just couldn’t feel the presence of God in that *new* tabernacle like he had in the old one. □

Like I said, change is always going to be experienced as the loss of something precious, even though it is a good change.

But let’s be clear: The message of the Bible doesn’t change. . . our theology doesn’t change. . . our ethical & moral stances don’t change. But the methods of reaching our surrounding world must. If we are to be effective today, we will have to continue developing new ministries and new structures. . . AND, experience the sting of change.

Somehow we’ve got to grab hold of the FUTURE without letting go of the PAST.

My prayer is that our church will be a movement, not a monastery. . . a living organism, not an organization (institution). Institutions preserve culture; movements create culture.

I close with a quote from Erwin McManus’ book *Unstoppable Force*, personalized to DUMC:

“When the church is a movement, it becomes a place of refuge for an unbelieving world. *Let DUMC* become the place where seekers finally find the God they were searching for. *Let DUMC* become the place for the broken and the weary to finally find the healing and the help they’ve cried for. *Let DUMC* become the place where the lonely and outcast are finally embraced and loved in the community of Christ. *As our* church becomes a movement and not a monastery, *we will* become a place of transformation for the very culture from which we run in fear.” [p. 65. . . italics mine]

Brothers & Sisters, we cannot afford to run from the world. . . or to over-identify with it.

There’s no place to hide, except in His presence. HE is our hiding place, our refuge, our shelter.

Let our church be a refuge—not FROM the world, but FOR the world.

CLOSING PRAYER

I pray Your Kingdom to forcefully advance within us. . . then through us. [Matthew 11:12]

Let it crash against the very gates of hell. [Matthew 16:18]

Makes us soldiers of light, dispelling the kingdom of darkness.