

TRINITY FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

Cardiphonia

Sounds of the Heart: Reflections on the Christian Life

Hip-hop, Hippies and Home Schoolers: Being All Things to All People

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“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”
1 Corinthians 9.19-23

Series Introduction

This *Cardiphonia* series is presented to provide *pastoral counsel with pastoral heart* for today's Christian. This is part of my intentional pastoral commitment to serve more effectively the theological and character growth of those in my care. I've created this medium to help shine more of *the whole counsel of God* into your hearts.

With its title derived from two Greek words—one meaning *heart* and the other *sounds*—our *Cardiphonia* series expresses the *heart sounds* of the pastoral leadership of Trinity Fellowship Church. In the course of life and ministry, pastors hear God speak through Word and circumstance, and gain perspective for the lives of those entrusted to their care. As they meditate on God's Word and care for God's people, God places within their hearts passions, burdens and joys that are intended for God's church. The *Cardiphonia* booklets attempt to serve both the pastoral team and the congregation of TFC by transferring such joys and concerns from our hearts to yours.

I offer this series in *faith* that God will bless any truth it expresses *and* will guard His church from any error that might creep in. I present it with the prayer that it will help provide more spiritual food for the Lord's flock in ways that will bless and strengthen those I love. May the blessing of God rest upon you as you hear these heart sounds expressed.

Yours in Christ,

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Hip-Hop, Hippies, and Home Schoolers: Being All Things to All People

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings...

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

(1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 10:31-11:1)

Introduction

This is without question a stunning and authoritative mission methodology statement from the apostle Paul. I would suggest that it reveals an approach to ministry in the local church that must help to guide decisions at many levels and to shape the future course of church methodology and mission. In short, Paul teaches us that while decisions made about church model and mission obviously must be made with a Bible in hand, they must also be made with a world audience in view.

Hip Hop, Hippies, and Home Schoolers

Our society is made up of all types of people, all of which comprise a multi-cultural reality with which today’s American Church needs to reckon. Gone is the illusion of a melting pot culture in which all cultures blend into one. Instead we have many cultures living side-by-side, each of which today’s Christians need to engage if we would make a difference in today’s world.

Representative of our society's many sub-cultures there's the hip hop world, there's the hippie generation (now graying), and there's the home school culture. Each represents something different; each needs to be understood, loved and reached. According to the Pauline model, if a local church is to be relevant, it must seek to identify the sub-cultures found in its own locale and moment, and then develop a mission methodology to suit them.

A Bible in Hand

But before we explore the evangelism significance of Paul's statements, and their implications for mission methodology, we'd do well to establish a foundational presupposition. I believe the text above will argue for radical awareness of our audience as an influential factor in the decision-making process and chosen style of church life. However, I understand this in the context of a fundamental commitment that all true churches must make: *the Bible must always be in hand as the governing rule for all of faith and practice.*

The Bible has much to say about what we are to believe and how we are to worship and live individually. It also says much about how we are to *do church* corporately. I believe in a Bible-driven ecclesiology and missiology. The first question to be asked by church leaders in their decisions—a question to which they must return every time there is *any* decision to be made—is: “What does God say about this in His Word?”

Churches are to be governed by the Word. They are to be consciously and relentlessly truth-driven. This means that they are not to make public opinion, political correctness, or human preferences, fads, or trends the *governing* influence in what they teach or how they structure their life together. The Bible has much to say about all *essential* matters relating to personal and congregational life; much that is to be believed and obeyed with all diligence.¹

¹ Trinity Fellowship Church's confessional standard, *A Faith to Confess: the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* reads: “The sum total of God's revelation concerning all things essential to His own glory, and to the salvation and faith and life of men, is either explicitly set down or implicitly contained in the Holy Scripture...(Chapter 1, Section 6, Paragraph 1)

While common sense and audience awareness are to guide certain decisions within the local church,² she must never allow her life to be governed by anything but the Word. Ours is a time of church fads and leadership compromise precisely because this presupposition has been ignored. We must remedy this leadership neglect of the Bible or churches will lose their relevance for this generation. We are only relevant if we are biblical. Perhaps ironically, we become irrelevant in the world only as we slavishly follow after the world. Following truth is far more urgent for our times than following trends.

Failure to keep this in mind has caused the Church to lose its transforming influence in our generation. While the Church is designed to be a window through which the world can see what it is supposed to be, it is too often today a mirror, in which the world only sees what it already is. The Church is not leading the world, it is following it.

A World Audience in View

But while the writers of Scripture forbid conformity to the world, they do not endorse ignorance or indifference to the world. This is the critical thrust of Paul's 1 Corinthians 9 statements. The apostle advocates a mission methodology that keeps the world audience in view and packages the gospel as accessibly and inoffensively as possible.

Re-read the text and you will see that Paul is saying nothing less than this: "I will adjust my style, my habits, my *externals* of behavior and even of *religious practice* to fit the people I am seeking to win to Christ." From this and other passages we learn what this meant for Paul in practice. He would drink wine (or not), eat meat (or not), eat meat that had been offered to idols (or not), take Jewish vows (or not), keep Jewish ceremonial laws (or not), allow a co-worker

² "At the same time, however, we acknowledge that inward enlightenment from the Spirit of God is necessary for the right understanding of what Scripture reveals. We also accept that certain aspects of the worship of God and of church government, which are matters of common usage, are to be determined by the light of nature and Christian common sense, in line with the general rules of God's Word from which there must be no departure" (*A Faith to Confess*, Chapter 1, Section 6, Paragraph 2)

to be circumcised (or not), keep the Old Covenant law (or not)—all based upon the audience he was trying to reach (see also Acts 16.3 and Gal. 2.3-5; Acts 21.17-26; 1 Cor. 10.26-33).

A Matter of First Impressions

Paul was concerned about the first and early impressions people had of him and his co-workers because he knew that those impressions might make the difference in gaining a hearing from his target audience. He was concerned not to appear too non-religious when with Jews or too fastidious in his observance of non-essential laws when with Gentiles.

What's fascinating and even profoundly important is that Paul's flexibility did not have to do simply with surface questions such as we might face today (like music or dress or building décor or forms of communication: e.g.-printed word, technology, drama, etc.), but with *actual religious practices and habits*. He was willing to leave people undisturbed in their very Jewish, very Old Covenant external religious forms—and even to participate in them himself—if he felt it would win him a hearing for the gospel. And he was willing to do this even though it created confusion and even controversy within the Church.

We must be clear that Paul never compromised the message of the gospel: salvation by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone for the glory of God alone. Nor did he ever countenance legalism—the idea that humans can gain, preserve or improve a relationship with God based on obedience to any laws, either human or divine.

Paul was zealously concerned to free people from anything like *bondage* to man-made rules or passé Old Testament legislation. But that said, we must see that he was deliberately sensitive to his audience and adjusted his style, his diet, and even his external religious practice and appearance to fit the crowd before him.

Paul was willing to adapt his practice of such significant religious acts as vows, sacrifices and circumcision so he could reach varied audiences. This radical ministry strategy would logically imply a similar willingness to modify his approach in matters far less significant; matters such as music styles, clothing, building design, and the like.

I suggest that this apostolic flexibility in significant religious practices is stunning, so stunning that I assume it is more than most traditional evangelicals are willing to process, never mind accept. Nevertheless, I would argue that it leads us to a paradigm for ministry—perhaps a paradigm shift, in some respects—that challenges us to think about implications for churches today. If Paul was willing to adapt his practice of such significant religious acts as vows, sacrifices and circumcision to reach various audiences, how much more flexible would he be with far less significant issues like music styles and dress “codes”, for that same purpose?

Cultural Accessibility

I think this apostolic missiological practice leads us to a missiological principle for life: it is the principle of *cultural accessibility*. I would define a commitment to *cultural accessibility* as a commitment to evaluate one’s contemporary audience—not so much *within* the church as *outside* it—in order to discern its world-view, language, habits, style, and forms, and then do all things possible to live and communicate within that audience’s world and ways, without compromising the objective content of the gospel, the ecclesiastical mandates of Scripture, or the moral character of our lives.

In this commitment to cultural accessibility we need to consider the following:

- Our calling is to present timeless truth in a timely form.**
- While biblical substance is inflexible, congregational style is in flux.**
- While the objective faith is unbending, the external form is unbinding.**

Truth, commandments, objective and absolute divine revelation, and enduring gospel realities can never be redefined, and the proclamation of these can never be muted for the sake of supposed cultural relevance.

Timeless vs. Temporary

Truth is timeless, inflexible and unbending. Examples of timeless truth and inflexible mandates of Scripture might include the following:

- Basic theology about God and gospel**

- The absolute laws and moral requirements of God’s Word³
- Commanded guidelines for worship (e.g.-expository preaching, exuberant singing, habitual giving, faithful reading of Scripture, etc.)
- Complementarian gender roles for family and church

There can be no flexibility, no bending in regard to these absolutes of God’s Word. We cannot sacrifice biblical faithfulness and obedience on the altar of cultural accessibility. Both a humility before God’s inspired and authoritative Word, *and* a concern for the moral and social crises of our times require that all such absolutes be vigorously defended and upheld.

But the form and style in which we present these truths may change depending on the audience we are trying to reach. For the sake of gaining an audience the externals may change while the essentials remain the same. Truth is timeless; methods and models are not.

Invasion of an Alien Faith

This commitment to cultural accessibility is precisely that we might be culturally *accessible*—within reach of a culture for which Biblical faith and orthodox Christianity are alien, even repugnant realities. All on its own, ours is a world and faith view that is foreign to our times, and repulsive to fallen

³ On a related matter there is much debate regarding how much believers should be current in their intake of pop culture in order to be able to connect to people’s everyday conversation and to understand the influences from which they are deriving their views of life. Movies, music, TV, talk shows, and the internet are the primary sources for the world views of most of our contemporaries. The debate rages over how current we should be in our familiarity with these cultural influences in order to be relevant for our times. While we cannot explore that debate here, I would offer an affirmation and a warning. I would affirm that to some degree we need to have at least a basic awareness of what’s going on in these spheres. We must not so separate from the world and its sinners that we lose our salt and light effect on it (Matthew 5:13, 14; 1 Corinthians 5:10; 10:27). On the other hand I would warn about the risks inherent in such cultural awareness. The motive for cultural awareness should always be missional not carnal. As we become culturally literate we must do so not because we *love* the world’s culture (1 John 2:15, 16), or are *of* the world’s mindset (John 15:19; 17:11, 16), or are being conformed to the world’s values (Romans 12:1, 2) but because we are *using* or *dealing with* the world (1 Corinthians 7:31) to win the world. It is disingenuous to speak of wanting to become culturally relevant when what we really want is to become culturally influenced or intoxicated.

human nature. We are alien invaders. Because of this, we do not need any additional barriers to people's attention caused by unnecessary cultural datedness, insensitivity or inaccessibility. Instead we need to be mindful of styles, ways and techniques that create favorable *first impressions* so we can gain a hearing for Christ.

Being culturally sensitive means for example that we need to be aware of our culture's instinct to identify excellence with visual images and technology. We need to realize that as superficial as it may seem, we live in a time of technological *first impressions* and image-awareness that affects people's attention span profoundly. For example, a Carleton University study shows in the words of one, that "so powerful is the impact of the first impression of your website that *the bias created in the first 1/20th of a second, continues to influence decisions about your church*"(emphasis not added).

This is just one example of the way first impressions affect our image-obsessed and appearance-focused 21st century American audience. Obviously this is not to suggest that we should be become equally obsessed with image technology or that we are to change our message or deny, distort, or dumb down the essentials of our faith because they are offensive or naturally repugnant to the human heart. But it is to say that we need to pay attention to the question: "How can we make the kind of first impression in the minds, eyes, and hearts of our audience that will at least give our message a chance to be heard?" I believe that this is, at the very least, what motivated Paul in his being all things to all men.

W.W.P.D.

I readily confess that I do not know fully the implications of this principle, nor have I, as yet, clearly marked out its boundaries in my own mind. But since Paul encourages us to follow his example in this model of ministry (1 Cor. 11.1), perhaps we would do well to ask: "*What would Paul do in application of his own cultural accessibility principle if he were alive today?*"

Applying this *W.W.P.D.* question, I suspect that if Paul lived in our times, he would at the very least, evaluate our styles, our music, our forms, our building décor, our evangelistic forays into the world, our website, our contexts in

which we are making our “first impressions”, our welcome ministry, our Sunday morning presentation from start to finish, our children’s ministry, our printed material, and perhaps even more. And I suspect that he would say that given the audience we face in a 21st century middle class, image and entertainment-obsessed community, with a smattering of minorities and various cultural variations thrown in, our various externals traditions and styles might need at least a partial makeover.

Is it too much to think that he’d look at the demographics of Ocean County and present a case for cultural sensitivity, and perhaps even a change in the style and methodology of our witness, so as to become accessible for the most possible amount of people? Is it not likely that in all decisions regarding all the *first impression tools* which leave an immediate impact on people’s consciousness, (such as those mentioned above: website, technology, décor, dress, music, etc.), he would argue that we be as contemporary, relevant, inviting, attention-grabbing, and undistracting as is possible? Would he not argue that we should be all things to all people, without compromising the objective content of the gospel or the moral character of our lives?

Mission vs. Preference

The question that needs to be asked when evaluating all externals of style or presentation is *not*: “What do we in our church want or prefer?” That question betrays what some have called ministry *ingrownness*, a mindset with a weak sense of mission and vision.

A far more critical question needing to be asked is: “What will most help our mission, and most impact this generation and the next?” Decisions regarding music, use of technology, and building design and décor, along with a host of other externals must be heavily influenced by a commitment to *mission over preference*.

Mission strategy trumps personal preference and even church tradition. This understanding will require that everyone be ready cheerfully and willingly to sacrifice personal preference of style and taste for the greater good: the reaching and saving of souls for the glory of Christ. If churches exist in large part to reach the world then churches need to be willing to speak the world’s

language. We must labor hard to communicate the gospel in ways the world can understand *without compromising any Biblical truth or value in the process*. This is not a call to embrace a radical *seeker friendly*⁴ model, or to exercise more marketing savvy. It is a call to pursue a more biblical model of evangelism and missiology. It is, to be precise, a call to love our unsaved neighbors and friends more than we love ourselves. It is a call to leave our congregational comfort zone in order to lead others to Christ.

Crossing the Cultural Divide Next Door

There is an undeniable principle of *cultural accessibility* argued for in Scripture. Missionaries who have traveled to other cultures have almost always understood this, and have adapted their dress, style, manner and music to fit their ministry sphere. It would be transparent folly for missionaries in Papua New Guinea to expect the people of that primitive island to wear American clothes, sing American hymns, or practice American traditions. It is the missionary's task to cross the cultural divide, and to employ tools and means from within that culture to communicate with those he is seeking to win, without compromising any truth or command from God in the process.

There is a cultural divide between American culture and the American Church today that is nearly as wide as that between the missionary and the unreached peoples he seeks to win in a foreign land. Ours is a secular and unchurched culture of pictures and technology and drums and guitars and dance and art and gourmet coffee and X-Games and blogging and fast-paced living that are as real and as distinctive as are the huts, hunting techniques, clothing and tribal drums, dance and music of our Papua New Guinean cultural counterparts.

The question we face is whether or not we will have a missionary heart to bridge these cultural gaps like our foreign missionary friends and heroes. Are we willing to embrace the mission identity of the church for our time and place

⁴ In my understanding, a *seeker friendly* model of church life typically does not begin with a Bible in hand to discern methodology and mission approach. It begins with the question: "What does the culture/world/audience desire in a church?" and then accommodates style and even content to the audience's desires. Instead of subjecting the cultural accessibility concern to a priority commitment to biblical mandates for church life, seeker friendly approaches have too frequently reversed the order.

and will we have the wisdom to adapt sufficiently to engage with the culture in which we find ourselves?

In these matters, mission-minded churches must pursue creativity, excellence, and faithfulness; creativity and excellence to adapt styles and forms suited to its surrounding culture while simultaneously being faithful to God and the written Word of Truth. Questions connected to these issues are not easy, and they do not lead to pat or easy answers. But answers must be found so local churches can regain the place of influence to which they have been called.

For Further Thought and Discussion

This *Cardiphonia* reflection is meant to be thought and discussion provocative. In these few pages it isn't possible to present all the implications of the *cultural accessibility* principle or to answer all questions related to it. So for your further reflection and discussion, I present several questions that I think need to guide and guide every local church mission and model:

- Are we sufficiently aware of what the cultural divide is that we have to overcome? Do we know how *very different* our music, décor, and styles are from the world's, not to mention our message and values?**
- Are we willing to evaluate such matters as style, dress, logos, printed material, website layout, building design and decor, welcome team excellence and appearance, dress code, and music genre with *cultural accessibility* in mind?**
- What are the primary, most common styles and preferences represented in our surrounding community to which we can adapt without compromising the integrity of our message or lives?**
- If we are to be mindful of the *next generation*, how might/should that affect all our thoughts in this regard?**
- Are our evangelism strategies and forays culturally sensitive and effective?**
- Are we willing to invest the money and resources required to achieve *excellence* in our appearance, presentation, décor, website development, events, (e.g. musically varied concerts, art shows, blood drives, coffee house ministry), technology, and printed materials; an excellence that is needed to cross the cultural divide?**

- **Except in matters of clear biblical doctrine and command, are we willing to lay aside preferences and tastes and let the cultural/mission priority dominate our decisions?**
- **What matters of style and/or substance are biblically negotiable; what are not? What's inflexible, and what's in flux?**

I offer all these thoughts to generate reflection. I hope to inspire an awareness of principles that can assist us in answering God's call upon us for our generation. The leadership of every church needs to think over these principles and then strategize for their application.