

## Evangelism and Cultural Identification

**Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-22.** The evangelistic principle here for us to imitate (see 1 Corinthians 10:32-11:1) is the principle of cultural identification: Without compromising in moral and/or doctrinal areas, we are to identify as much as possible with the non-Christian culture we are seeking to reach.

"though not myself..." (vs 20,21) - Paul is under grace and living within biblical moral absolutes. In the area of doctrine and morality, we are not to compromise or else we lose what we have to offer to non-Christians.

"to the Jew I became as a Jew . . . to those under the Law, as under the Law . . . to those who are without law, as without law . . . to the weak I became weak . . . I have become all things to all men" - Paul meets people on their level culturally. When with Jews, he observed their dietary restrictions (wouldn't order bacon with his eggs). When with pagans, he went naked in the gymnasiums, quoted their authors, etc.

### Why is this principle so important?

The language of this text makes it clear that the observance of this principle is very important in reaching people for Christ (" . . . that I might win . . . "). When we identify with our audience's culture, more people will be reached for Christ.

If the gospel is really true and really universally applicable, why can't we simply get a tract in every mailbox, a Bible in every house and say that we have evangelized people effectively?

The answer to this should be obvious to all of us. People will not receive a message which they do not perceive to be relevant to their own lives.

People tend to view themselves primarily in terms of their own personal experiences and cultural heritage. Therefore, in order to be perceived as meaningful and relevant, the gospel must be communicated in a way with which the non-Christian can identify culturally. Non Christians can't "hear" the gospel effectively otherwise because of the "noise" of our different culture. This is why missiologists remind us that people like to be able to become Christians without having to cross cultural boundaries.

### Discussion Question:

How many of you were brought to Christ by someone with whom you could identify personally and culturally? How big of a factor would you say this was?

Along with the message of grace, this is a key evangelistic principle. In fact, it is an expression of the message of grace. Just as we do not make people change morally before they can come to Christ, so we don't insist that they change culturally in order to come to Christ. Christ himself is our example for this principle. He definitely "changed cultures" to reach man! Out of love, the Christian should make the effort necessary to do just this.

But there is an unconscious tendency for Christians to identify Christianity with their own personal cultural tastes and thus to drift into a cultural "ghetto" that needlessly alienates non-Christians from Christ. When this is the case, Christians often misinterpret non-Christians' distaste for their cultural tastes as "hardness to the gospel." The resultant perspective is sometimes called a "fortress" mentality.

Christians sit safely inside the walls of their church and church culture, judging the non-Christian world for its "worldliness" and hardness of heart. When this happens, the message of the gospel becomes effectively sealed off from all but those who happen to identify with the "Christian" culture. And, tragically,

Christianity is not seen as the personally and culturally relevant world-view that it is, but instead as an irrelevant anachronism.

For this reason, church structures and strategies must be formulated in a way which not only promotes true spirituality, but also cultural identification with the society to be reached. This has been a key distinctive of Xenos through the years, and accounts for a large measure of our evangelistic success.

### **Discussion**

What are some examples of the application of this principle at Xenos?

### **Central Teachings (Seeker-Sensitive Meetings)**

Xenos calls its large meetings (in place since 1976) because we began as a collection of home churches. The teachings we shared were centralized, unlike the rest of our activities.

The purpose of the Seekers' meetings is to provide the non-Christian with a "safe place to hear a dangerous message." Every aspect of the meeting has been designed with the unchurched seeker in mind. The atmosphere is casual and unchurched. The dress is also casual. The meeting is large enough for the unchurched person to feel safely anonymous while he investigates. The musical style and content is selected to impact the seeker rather than to promote corporate worship for the Christian attendees. Other modern media (such as computer graphics) are used to communicate the relevance of Christianity to modern unchurched people.

The teachings are filled with contemporary language and examples; theological words are explained and we avoid "Christianese." We use a contemporary version of the Bible. Collections of money are announced with a specific disclaimer to the seeker that he should not feel obligated to give.

### **Parties**

One of the main purposes for parties is to give non-Christian friends the opportunity to discover that Christians in Xenos are culturally and personally relevant people. Sometimes, the non-Christians may drink too much or become rowdy, but we feel that parties are still an effective way of communicating the cultural "common ground" that we share with non-Christians, and therefore open up additional opportunities to discuss Christianity.

### **Attending Bars and Non-Christian Parties**

When Jesus was invited to parties held by "sinners," he accepted. He evidently did this so much that he became liable to the erroneous charge that he was a "wine-bibber and a glutton" (Mt. 11:19). When he was rebuked by religious people for this practice, he defended himself by reminding them that he "did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt. 9:13).

Jesus loved lost people enough to identify with them culturally in this setting. Christians have this same privilege and responsibility (although some may not have the self-control to handle these settings).

### **Taking in Non-Christian Movies, Books, Music, etc.**

Media is a powerful expression of culture. Therefore, those who wish to reach non-Christian people do well to understand the media of that culture. It is evident that Paul read Greek and Roman literature because he quotes it many times in his speeches and letters. By demonstrating an awareness of non-Christian books, movies and music, we open doors of receptivity to the message of Christ.

Some object to this practice by saying that non-Christian media contains false and immoral content. Of course, this is true. However, the Christian is equipped with the Word of God with which to discern truth

from error. If his motivation is to more effectively reach non-Christians for Christ, he should be applauded rather than judged.

### **Discussion**

Did any of the above four factors play into your own salvation, or someone else's that you know? If so, explain how.

Some Christians can communicate a very clear, crisp explanation of the gospel message, but are really lacking in the cultural identification department. Other Christians can relate beautifully with the culture, but often find themselves tongue-tied, shy, or they let golden opportunities float by to explain Christ to the non-Christian. Some Christians are pretty good at both or neither of these elements. Which of these most characterizes you these days?