



Christianity Is Lived “Inside” Cultures

By Patrick Morley

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My pastor and I used to go to lunch at Steak and Shake every Friday—back in the 1990s when the franchise was under-managed and the buildings were stuck in the 1950s.

I remember thinking dozens of times, *This is such a great product. What a super opportunity for someone to refresh a tattered brand and update the facilities.* Today, of course, all Steak and Shake restaurants have been modernized and new ones regularly pop up everywhere.

Steak and Shake fell on hard times because they didn't keep up with the culture. It astonishes me how many churches are just like Steak and Shake. We have such a great product, but in many cases we haven't kept pace with the culture. As a result, our buildings look stuck in a time warp. Many of our traditions are out of step with the times too (e.g. style of music and language forms). No wonder “sales” are down! Thank God for all the churches who have kept pace with the times but, in many places, the “brand” needs refreshing.

This is completely biblical. Paul was more than willing to accommodate—make that *engage*—the culture.

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. (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)

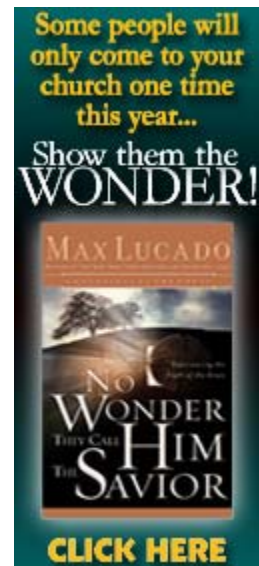
Why was Paul such a chameleon? Because he understood that Christianity is lived “inside” cultures. Christianity is not a culture of its own. That's why Paul didn't fret over customs and traditions. That's why Paul didn't give a second thought to....

- Circumcising Timothy while preaching elsewhere that it wasn't necessary (Acts 16:3).
- Telling Philemon to take back his slave, Onesimus, as a brother without calling for the abolition of slavery (Philemon 1:10). (Paul didn't try to change his cultural status, rather to increase his spiritual status).
- Going to Jerusalem and performing a Jewish custom—to shave his head and pay to purify himself and four others in accordance with Jewish law (Act 21:23-24).

Even Jesus did not come to abolish culture.

Of course, “change for the sake of change” is no virtue. But neither is not changing so we can keep things “the way we've always done them.”

Christianity is lived inside cultures, and churches that grasp this concept attract



the lost. Churches that say, “This is the way we’ve always done it” are not only stuck in the past but, frankly, poor stewards of the brand—like Steak and Shake used to be.

Firm on Doctrine, Loose on Traditions

Of course, Paul was a tiger when it came to doctrine. We never change the message, but we should always deliver the message in the way a particular culture is most likely to respond—whether Asians, Gen Y, gays, bikers, or executives. Francis Schaeffer put it this way: “Each generation of the church in each setting has the responsibility of communicating the gospel in understandable terms, considering the language and thought-forms of that setting.” It is our duty.

By calling men to Christ we are not calling them to an ancient culture. Instead, we are calling them to the living Jesus. Christ is alive, and He lives inside cultures. If we want to be where He is, we must live our Christianity inside cultures too. Let’s explore a few ways this might be applied.

A Beautiful Home

A man from Africa told an interesting story to our Man in the Mirror Bible Study. As part of their ministry, his family moved into a neighborhood that was run down—unkempt yards, trashy streets, and poorly maintained homes.

He said to his family, “Because we are Christians we must have a beautiful home.” So they planted grass and flowers. They painted and refurbished their house. They cleaned up their street. People took notice. When someone asked why they had done this, he was able to explain how it was their duty to Christ—and then he could share the gospel.

Soon another family decided to emulate them. And then another, and another. Before long the entire neighborhood was transformed.

This man understood that Christianity is lived inside cultures.

The Bible and the Newspaper

Karl Barth famously said, “Study with your Bible in one hand and your newspaper in the other.” Since Christianity is lived inside cultures, to be relevant we must understand what questions the culture is asking about God.

Our men are looking for answers to their questions, not answers to the questions of people who lived 2,000 years ago. Of course, you and I know the 2,000 year old answer still applies. But we have the responsibility to help our men see the connection they will not see on their own.

Denominations Are Cultures Too

Denominations are like the colors of the rainbow, each beautiful in its own way. “Color” is created when white light passes through a prism, gets “bent,” and then separates into the different shades of the rainbow. As beautiful as denominations can be, no one denomination can reflect “all” of God’s light.

The truth of the gospel is simple and elegant, but the breadth of God’s truth is uncontainable. So each denomination does its best to pull together a “representative sample” of the truth. This means our denominations are “diminishments” of God’s light, not “perfections” of it.

As such, denominations are cultures too. We have traditions of dress, buzz



words, and worship styles. Unguarded, the tendency can be to make a spiritual test out of something over which Jesus remained neutral. If we're not careful, we can create a "Christian" culture that causes men to stumble over obstacles other than the Cross. As Francis Schaeffer said, "There are some things Scripture specifically commands or prohibits. Everything else is spiritual."

"In But Not Of" And "Into"

Many people are convinced they are going to heaven, but are content to let the world go to hell. Jesus said we are "in" but not "of" the world, but He didn't stop there. He also said, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18).

If Christianity is lived inside cultures, then what is our responsibility to our culture? Jesus wants to send us to improve our culture. We are ambassadors who bring the civilization of the gospel. Christians stabilize culture. Consider Daniel, Joseph, and Mordecai—three Jews (true believers) who rose to high positions in non-Christian cultures. They were ambassadors for God—and stabilizing influences—inside their cultures.

It is not our assignment to create a Christian culture. Our assignment is to represent God within the culture. To do that, we have to go "into" the culture. On matters not specifically commanded or prohibited by Scripture, we adapt to the culture. We don't require the culture to adapt to us. That's how Paul did it.

Paul was such a chameleon. He knew that by becoming all things to all men, he might save some. That's why you and I should be chameleons too.

"Christianity is lived inside cultures." What implications and opportunities does this concept present to you in your church, ministry, home, language forms, work, and as a family?

Yours for changed lives,

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