

During the 1950's and 1960's the churches of Christ were considered to be one of the fastest growing evangelical denominations in the United States. However, in the 1970's they never really made major progress on American campuses like so many other movements, and they faced slowing growth trends all around. This was alarming among many of the more evangelistic members. One of the reasons for the stagnation of growth in the churches of Christ in the 1970's seems to have been that their churches' message did not keep pace with culture. The language it spoke, its worship style, and the entire church culture was becoming somewhat socially irrelevant, especially among younger adults. The package that they wrapped the gospel message in had not changed in 20 or 30 years, but the society that the package was sent to had changed dramatically during that time.

During the 1970's the founders of the International Churches of Christ were young, enthusiastic and committed church of Christ members who sincerely desired to see Christianity spread among their generation. They had their pulse on the culture of that day and recognized that the churches of Christ were not moving towards becoming more socially relevant. They realized that to reach a generation with the gospel, a movement must speak to that generation in a language that will be heard. In other words, the package the gospel was put in needed to be one that current culture would open. In essence, the International Church of Christ was born in the late 1970's as a movement that communicated the old message of the gospel in a new way that resonated with a new culture, and communicated it in a way that the new culture would embrace.

Now, here in 2007, our churches face another shift in culture. Postmodernism now dominates the face of American society, whether some of us who loved modernism want to admit it or not. Postmodernism is characterized by asking many questions, seeking relative truth, learning through experiencing, yearning for true community, and wanting authority to prove its legitimacy before it is accepted. Modernism is characterized by the love of objective truth, things that can be proven or disproven, individual responsibility, and a greater acceptance of authority. Postmodernism is not a trend, not a fad, not "wrong" or "right": it is simply the current cultural language. We need to accept that fact. We also need to realize that it is time for us to repackage the gospel message so that our society will hear it. This does not mean that we "change the gospel message", but merely that we change the package.

In the 1st century Jesus packaged the gospel of the Kingdom of God in a way that his society was excited to hear. Today, if Jesus were to travel on foot from town to town as a homeless preacher, with a few loyal followers always on his heels, healing people and preaching in the public squares using cryptic and sometimes confusing stories, he would be written off as insane. His message was a product of the Father, but His methods were very much a product of his times. His timeless gospel message in its 1st century package would never draw 21st century crowds. In the same way, our culture will not accept, let alone embrace, a gospel it will not listen to, just as the culture in the 1970's no longer listened to the gospel the churches of Christ wrapped in a 1950's package.

I fear that we face the prospect of becoming culturally irrelevant and witnessing a slow, drawn out, painful decline in our fellowship. If we continue to insist that the package of the 1970's is part and parcel of the gospel message itself, we will miss out on the spiritual harvest that is our society. There is so much spiritual potential among young adults today. Today's American youth have a great passion to change the world. The harvest IS plentiful, but the gospel needs to be presented in a way that will be *heard*. We cannot become just another denominational statistic. We cannot accept that we will be just another in a long line of movements who failed to keep up with the times. We cannot look at the package that was formed in the 1970's and confuse that package with the gospel itself. The gospel is timeless. Packages are not. If we fail to remain culturally relevant—or refuse to - we will fail to remain a force in bringing in the harvest to God.

But we are well positioned to succeed. Many of the founders of our movement are still around and in positions of leadership. Since many of them are modernists at heart and have been through major cultural shifts themselves, they can offer a guiding and moderating voice as we catch up with today's society, as we repackage the gospel. Their collective wisdom and years of ministry experience are invaluable to this task. These men and women can be an impetus to change rather than an impedance. This will take respect and humility from the younger generation of Christians, and willingness to learn and change from the older generation.

More importantly, though, the gospel itself transcends culture and any shifts that may happen in culture. God reveals a truth in the bible that unifies the best aspects of modernism and postmodernism, that calls us to be whole, to live a life that unites mind, soul, body, and heart. We are called to love the objective truths of God's

Law, to live with personal responsibility, and to follow authority. But we are also called to experience God's love and creation by living what we believe, by doing so in community, and to question the authority of our culture and what it says is important. It is as if God has answered the question "Which is right, modern or postmodern?" by saying "both", and... "neither". ***The question really isn't whether the bible is modern or postmodern. It is equally neither; it transcends the labels by being the best, and only the best, of both all along.*** The solution really does not come from embracing one aspect of culture over the other, but in recognizing that while culture changes, and while our delivery of the gospel changes, the gospel itself never has, never does, and never will.

In this sense, the gospel is opposed to culture, but not as an adversary. Adversaries tend to be equals, peers. The gospel transcends culture, and is not its peer. God knew that cultures would change and that humans would both resist and embrace change, but cultural shifts don't take God by surprise, nor do they foil His plans. As the writer of Ecclesiastes said

what has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one can say,
"Look! This is something new"?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.

God is prepared to face our changing culture with his unchanging gospel. So must we, if we are going to be the people that He called us to be and fulfill the mission that He gave us.