

What Evangelism Should Look Like in a Digital, Social Age

In ministry, some things must never change, but others must change constantly.

Clearly, God's five purposes for his church are non-negotiable. If a church fails to balance the five purposes of worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and evangelism, then it's no longer a healthy church, and it's in danger of becoming simply a social club.

On the other hand, the way or style in which we fulfill these eternal purposes must continually be adjusted and modified because human culture is always changing.

For instance, when I first started Saddleback Church, fresh out of Southwestern Seminary, computers were in their infancy, slow and cumbersome and capable of very limited functions. The internet was just a crude academic network and nobody had even heard of email. Now I often sit in my pajamas and have conversations with people across the globe.

In addition, you can get on a plane and within a few hours fly to almost anywhere in the world, and that means there's even less of an excuse for not being involved in foreign missions, even if just for the short-term. The times, they are a-changing, and they'll keep right on a-changing whether we want them to or not.

And that's why at Saddleback, any time a new tool becomes available, we embrace it. Before the World Wide Web, there was Gopher, and Saddleback used it. And we've used the web, Facebook, Twitter and every other major social media tool since.

Our message must never change, but the way we deliver that

message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation.

In other words, our message of transformation must never change while the *transformation of our presentation* should be continual, adapting to the new languages of our culture.

Consider this: the word “contemporary” literally means “with temporariness.” By nature, nothing contemporary is meant to last forever! It is only effective for a while and only relevant in that particular moment—which is what makes it contemporary.

What is considered contemporary and relevant in the next 10 years will inevitably appear dated and tired in 20 years. As a pastor, I’ve watched churches adopt many contemporary styles in worship, programming, architecture, music and evangelism. That’s OK, as long as the biblical message is unchanged.

But whatever is in style now will inevitably be out of style soon, and the cycles of change are getting shorter and shorter, aided by technology and the media. New styles and preferences, like fashions, are always emerging.

Let me give you a word of advice. Never attach your church to a single style—you’ll soon be passé, and outdated. One of the secret strengths of Saddleback Church is that we’re constantly adapting; we’ve changed styles of worship, programming and outreach many, many times in the last 36 years, and we’ll continue to do so because the world keeps changing.

The only way to stay relevant is to anchor your ministry to unchanging truths and eternal purposes but be willing to continually adapt how you communicate those truths and purposes.

In 36 years at Saddleback, we’ve never had a planned, organized visitation program. Yet, we’ve baptized over 47,000 people! Our church has grown simply by inviting one

person at a time, friends from work, school, the neighborhood and social networks.

Our members are constantly on mission to bring their friends and neighbors to our weekend services, where we reach out to unbelievers—particularly those who have no real church background—by singing songs they can embrace, voicing prayers that help them relate and preaching messages they understand. We make Christianity available on an introductory level to any visitor to Saddleback.

You might wonder if we attract these visitors by watering down the gospel, but we don't; we simply communicate it in ways that unbelievers understand! Jesus drew enormous crowds (called multitudes) without compromising the message. He was clear, practical and loving, and He presented His timeless message in a contemporary fashion.

Lost people have a need for meaning, a need for purpose, a need for forgiveness, a need for love. They want to know how to make right decisions, how to protect their families, how to handle suffering and how to have hope in our world. These are all issues we have answers for, yet millions ignore the message of Christ because we insist on communicating in ways that make little sense any more.

In a sense, we've made the gospel too difficult for a changing culture to understand. Let me give you this analogy: Imagine a missionary going overseas and saying, "I'm here to share the Good News, but first you have to learn to speak my language, learn my customs and sing my style of music." You can immediately see why this strategy would fail!

Yet we do that all the time in a culture that is in radical flux. If we want to reach people in the current century, we must start thinking differently. I believe the most overlooked requirement in the church is to have spiritually mature members—members who unselfishly limit their own preferences of

what they think a church should look like in order to reach lost people for Christ. As Jesus said in Luke 5:38, "But new wine must be put into new wineskins."

Here's a simple tradition to break in the 21st century: Stop thinking of the church as an institution. Emerging generations are desperately looking for community. You and I may know that the church is a community, but emerging generations have never seen it that way. They've seen a list of rules, not a loving community. This is a prime example of an opportunity to re-state the eternal truths of the Bible in a fresh, contemporary way,

Emerging generations are also focused on the experiential, and that means we have to adjust the way we teach and preach because most traditional churches focus almost exclusively on the intellect. In the 21st-century church, we not only want people to know about God, we also want them to actually encounter God.

Of course, this means rather than preaching simply for information, we should also preach for action. Our message is not meant to just inform, but to transform the lives of those in our congregation. In almost every single sermon I preach every point has a verb in it—something to do. What are you going to do now that you know this godly truth?

Why do I do it this way? Because God says, "Be doers of the Word, not hearers only," and our entire purpose driven process at Saddleback is designed to move people, not only into intimacy with God, but also into service for Him, where they'll experience a deep and broader faith in the midst of community and ministry.

Since planting Saddleback, spiritual seekers have changed a lot. In the first place, there are a whole lot more of them! There are seekers everywhere! I've never seen more people so hungry to discover and develop the spiritual dimension of

their lives. That's why there's such a big interest in Eastern thought, New Age practices, mysticism and the transcendent.

Today seekers are hungry for symbols and metaphors and experiences and stories that reveal the greatness of God. Because seekers are constantly changing, we must be sensitive to them like Jesus was, be willing to meet them on their own turf and speak to them in ways they understand.

Remember, the world changes, but the Word doesn't. To be effective in ministry we must learn to live with the tension between those two.

My prayer is that God will use you the way He used David, as described in Acts 13:36, to serve God's purpose in your generation. We need churches that are both purpose-driven and postmodern, timeless and timely at the same time! May God use you greatly and may you fulfill His purpose for your life.
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