

Faith Pulpit

Seeker Sensitive or Sinner Sensitive? Part 2

In the last issue I presented what I believe to be the short-comings of the Seeker Sensitive movement. It has been my observation that this movement, though beginning with good intentions, has strayed from the biblical model of evangelism. “Seekers” have become a marketplace and the gospel a commodity, the price of which has been continually lowered to meet the demands of the consumer. The tragic loser is the sinner himself, who has been misled to believe that salvation can be on his terms rather than God’s.

The Seeker Sensitive movement has coined a good phrase, but it is a misnomer, a name wrongly used to describe what is happening in contemporary churches. A poor person who buys an expensive product because of how it was advertised can’t be said to have had his needs met. Sinners who are drawn to church by advertising that portrays the church as worldly can’t be said to have had their needs met. Seekers by convenience must become sinners by conviction if their needs are to be honestly met. As has already been said, any church could draw a crowd. But to what extent is it willing to go just to attract people to the church?

After a couple decades of studying generations and fads, from boomers to millennials, postmoderns to convergents, I wonder if we will one day discover that these were but a small percentage of our society, yet we changed all our churches to please them. It wouldn’t be the first time a society has wagged the whole dog by the tail of the culturally elite. (The next time you are in a crowded grocery store or the local auto parts outlet, ask yourself how many of these people know or care which French deconstructionist turned semiotics into the methodology of kitsch within the church!) Most people are still normal people. They understand normal language, and they will make an intelligent decision when presented with one. The gospel must be understood and either accepted or rejected. If there is a small segment of society that has become angry at God and cannot love His church, then that is a human choice for which those individuals will be responsible before God as well. Let’s give them the gospel

too, plainly and lovingly, but without change, compromise or regret. There are still many people who are waiting to hear the message of hope and who will respond positively when they hear it. In Corinth, Paul might have been tempted to make his message more palatable because of the negative reception and the threat of Gallio's judgment seat, but the Lord appeared to him and said, "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:9–10). God still has "much people" in our towns and cities who are waiting for the good news of Christ. In the early part of the twentieth century, J. Gresham Machen was noticing similar trends within the Presbyterian Church, USA. Long before his departure from that body he wrote the following words:

The fundamental fault of the modern Church is that she is busily engaged in an absolutely impossible task-she is busily engaged in calling the righteous to repentance. Modern preachers are trying to bring men into the Church without requiring them to relinquish their pride; they are trying to help men avoid the conviction of sin. The preacher gets up into the pulpit, opens the Bible, and addresses the congregation somewhat as follows: 'You people are very good,' he says; 'you respond to every appeal that looks toward the welfare of the community. Now we have in the Bible-especially in the life of Jesus-something so good that we believe it is good enough even for you good people.' Such is modern preaching. But it is entirely futile. Even our Lord did not call the righteous to repentance, and probably we shall be no more successful than He.^{[1](#)}

The Sinner-Sensitive Model

Jesus did not call the self-righteous to repentance. That is, He knew that a person must see himself as a sinner before he will truly believe. It is in this regard that I believe we must become "sinner sensitive." The following points parallel but contrast with the six points made about the Seeker Sensitive movement.

1. It starts with separation

Whereas the seeker-sensitive model starts with assimilation of the church into the world and the world into the church, conservative Christianity has understood that God commands His children to be separate from the world because separation brings power and effectiveness to our witness. This is true of both personal separation issues: "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim 2:19) and ecclesiastical separation issues: "But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (vv. 20–21).

In spite of the untrue accusations that separatists hide their heads in the sand and don't go out into the world as witnesses, time has shown that more people have been won to Christ in the age of grace by

separatists than by anyone else! But we go into the world without being of the world. It's all right for the ship to be in the sea, but when the sea gets into the ship, the whole project is lost. The cross of Christ is a stumblingblock and even brings shame to the carrier, but it also brings power to the gospel message: "the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil 3:10). Paul said: "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). C.H. Spurgeon, in his own Downgrade Controversy wrote, "At any rate, cost what it may, to separate ourselves from those who separate themselves from the truth of God is not alone our liberty, but our duty."²

2. It is designed for the saint

The Church of Jesus Christ is the body of believers gathered to do His business. Sinners are not only welcome to come but are also invited to come! When they come they will see what believers do in church and may find that to be uncomfortable. But such discomfort is often the beginning of the conviction process which is necessary for the gospel witness. Not every patient who walks into the emergency room of the hospital finds it to be comfortable, yet it surely is necessary. As Paul admonished the Corinthians, "If all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth" (1 Cor 14:24–25).

3. It draws by pneumatology

Rather than drawing people by seeker methodology, the church has sought and should seek the power of the Holy Spirit to draw the sinner to Christ. When Paul wrote back to the Thessalonian believers, he confessed, "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake" (1 Thess 1:5). No amount of entertainment and emotional release can draw a sinner to repentance and faith. In fact, these things only cloud the issue and often place roadblocks in the way—roadblocks that can take a lifetime to overcome. The Holy Spirit desires to speak of "sin, and of righteousness and of judgment" (John 16:8). This is what made Felix tremble before the gospel and plead for a more "convenient season" (Acts 24:25).

4. It continually seeks conviction

Many today have concluded that pressing a person about his lost condition is a negative of the gospel. Ed Dobson says, "In our context, walking down an aisle puts people on the spot; it applies pressure that is inappropriate when people are fragile and confronted with their relationship to God."³ I'm sure Agrippa would have liked Dobson more than Paul when he cried out, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:27), and Festus said, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad" (Acts 26:24). This is the vital difference in the two approaches! The seeker approach seeks

to protect itself from the sinner's scorn, but the soul-winner is willing to "commend himself to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2). It is this placing ourselves at risk with the sinner's conscience that keeps us from "the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully" (2 Cor 4:2).

5. It aims toward repentance and faith

Though I believe that the Seeker Sensitive movement desires to see people saved, its emphasis on pleasing the sinner detracts from the path to repentance. Historically, when the zeal of preaching public repentance to sinners waned, easier methods of counting converts arose, such as confirmation classes. People were educated into Christ and blended into the church. I believe that will gradually happen in the seeker churches as people are brought in slowly and "brought up to speed" on how a "Christian" should act in the church. Vance Havner noticed this trend fifty years ago when he wrote, "We have made it easy for hundreds superficially to 'accept Christ' without ever having faced sin and with no sense of need. We are healing slightly the hurt of this generation, trying to treat patients who do not even know they are sick."⁴ Conservatives, whether fundamentalists or evangelicals, have become known for their forthrightness with the gospel. Public invitations and soul winning have become trademarks for evangelistic churches. "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences" (2 Cor 5:11).

6. It ends in changed lives

The bottom line of effective evangelism is a new creation in Christ! The New Testament does not entertain the idea of a believer whose life does not change. In such cases (as with Simon in Acts 8), the professing believer is either disciplined or not accepted as a true believer. This fact does not discount the normal growth pattern of new believers as "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become [perfect tense: "are becoming"] new" (2 Cor 5:17); rather, this fact indicates that the new birth makes new creatures. The sad but obvious truth is that the Seeker Sensitive movement has proved the adage, "What you win them with is what you win them to." Many who claim that lives are changed can do so only because the whole biblical standard for a changed life was redefined before the person ever "signed on."

A common accusation about older saints is that they won't change. The irony of this accusation is that our older saints did change! Years ago, when they came to Christ, they left their old lives and became new creatures in Christ. And they have remained changed! They are right to object to this accusation when those making it are refusing to make the same change and have no intention of changing from what they were without Christ to what they should become in Christ. It is not the older people who won't change; it is the new generation that resists change, refusing to come to our churches and our faith unless we agree that they won't have to leave their sinful lifestyle.

And So...Our conservative, traditional or “normal” churches have no need to hang their heads nor to feel inferior to the seeker sensitive churches. It is not that our services are perfect by any means. But until a better idea than the seeker model comes along, I think we’ll stay where we are and where we have been for centuries. The Scripture is our only measure of success. We will keep conforming to that, but not to the latest thing men have proposed.

Works Cited

1. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 68.
2. C.H. Spurgeon, *The Downgrade Controversy* (Pasadena: Pilgrim Publications, nd), 72.
3. Ed Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 110.
4. Vance Havner, *Hearts Afire* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, nd), 51.

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