



Faith Pulpit

Seeker Sensitive or Sinner Sensitive? Part 1

Maybe it's just me, but does it seem as if many are saying that no one has been "sensitive" to "seekers" until the end of the twentieth century? One gets the feeling from such writers that, until recently, most Christian evangelism was overly aggressive, mean-spirited, and did everything possible to turn sinners off to the gospel. But, now, thanks to contemporary cultural relevancy, the world can finally be won because now we can understand and truly reach out to the sinner.

And, if that is not the case, then at least it must be true that, although Moody, Spurgeon, Finney, Whitfield and others did evangelism differently in their own day, they too would surely make the change to "seeker-sensitive" evangelism if they were alive today. "Why?" you ask. Because, although much of what they wrote and practiced seems to be to the contrary, surely such innovative thinkers of those days would agree with what seems to be successful in our day.

The problem is only partly one of semantics. As I hinted above, this isn't the first generation of believers to be sensitive to those seeking Christ. It seems to me that, in order to convince us that today's seeker-sensitive churches are better, much effort has to be taken to discredit those evangelistic churches of the past as being legalistic, numbers-oriented, controlling and otherwise insincere.

In defending Willow Creek's seeker-sensitive approach, G.A. Pritchard begins by telling us that now Christians no longer "have to be rude or obnoxious in sharing their faith."¹ Ed Dobson, in defending his seeker approach, begins by telling us, "To reach the non-evangelical generation of our day, we must break out of our tradition-bound isolation and relate the gospel to people where they are."² One Focus on the Family book on evangelism begins by saying, "Many Christians of our generation were taught mechanical, aggressive (some would say intrusive) methods of evangelism that produced minimal results."³ These unkind (and mostly untrue) remarks are typical in seeker-sensitive material, and they succeed in indentifying with the younger reader's quest for change.

The semantic problem arises in the use of the terms “seeker” and “sensitive.” Though it is true that older Fundamentalists were also seeker-sensitive, the “seeker” of today’s Seeker Sensitive movement may or may not be a “seeker” of the gospel at all. The “sensitive” nature of contemporary churches may or may not be truly “sensitive” to sinners at all. Any church of any age could “attract” lost people if they wanted to, but the question has always been, “What is proper for a church to do?” To be “relevant” (for the Christian) has never meant what has “worked” but, rather, what is right to do at that particular time.

What did Paul mean when he wrote, “There is none that seeketh after God” (Rom 3:11)? What did Jesus mean when He said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44)? I don’t have to believe in irresistible grace to understand that a sinner does not desire nor seek the things of God, and that the sinner must be drawn to Him by the Holy Spirit and the Word, and that the Holy Spirit is very particular in the way He works.

I think that the Seeker Sensitive movement has wrongly characterized past evangelism as consisting mostly of offensive, in-your-face type of people and methods. This characterization just isn’t true, although young people today have no way of verifying the truth or falsehood of such a claim. Of course there were exceptions as there are in any age and in any movement. Many large churches of the past fifty years were too pragmatic for my conscience as well. There is no doubt that many large churches of the past fifty years used methodologies designed only for nickels and noses. The critical difference, in my opinion, is that the moral nature of methodologies has changed drastically in fifty years. Giving bus kids candy does not compare to turning the whole church into a musical rock concert designed to imitate the world so that the world will come to church. You might say both were “seeker-sensitive,” but the nature as well as the results of those methods have been noticeably different.

The Seeker-Sensitive Model

Here are what I might call six “marks” or “characteristics” of most contemporary churches. In this issue I will present these characteristics of the “seeker-sensitive” model, and in the next issue I will contrast them with characteristics of what I call the “sinner-sensitive” model.

1. It starts with assimilation

In today’s seeker-sensitive model, the sinner is slowly assimilated into the fellowship and services of the church, and the church is readily assimilated into the culture of the world. Paul is not being a prude when he says, “Come out from among them, and be ye separate” (2 Cor 6:17). Pritchard says that “Hybels identifies with [unchurched] Harry by adopting his language, clothing, customs, and lifestyle. Whenever it is possible, Hybels underlines that he is similar to the unchurched Harry who has just walked in the door.”⁴

This should sound odd to anyone reading his Bible on a regular basis. This is not just being neighborly, or adjusting your clothing for some event, but rather changing your whole life-style to make the sinner feel good. It also keeps the Christian from feeling out of place in the world.

2. It is designed for the sinner

Assimilation leads quickly to a new design for the church altogether. It is now more comfortable for the sinner than for the saint. Almost everything, especially the Sunday service, is planned with the sinner's tastes and thought processes in mind. Emerging church leader Brian McLaren admits that making this change is dictated by the church's "mission" (read: subjective vision), "So, the new church will be relativistic about its program. It will expect change."⁵ Paul says the church is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

3. It is drawn by methodology

The sinner is now being drawn into the church and supposedly to Christ almost entirely by the new methodologies being employed for his sake. No longer is the sinner expected to be uncomfortable or feel out of place. I'm sure seeker-sensitive proponents would disagree, but at this point it becomes less and less of a possibility that the sinner is being drawn by the Holy Spirit. Conviction has been greatly minimized, and the spiritual has been cleverly disguised.

George Barna calls this "marketing" a "viable component of ministry."⁶ Dobson says this search for methodology led him to "informal, contemporary (nontraditional), no pressure for involvement or commitment, relevant to these people's needs, casual, 'laid-back' format, visually appealing."⁷ Pritchard says, "Although Creekers avoid the word entertainment they are seeking to creatively provide an interesting, agreeable, and amusing experience to unchurched Harry."⁸ This practice is, or comes dangerously close to, "corrupting [lit. "hawking"] the word of God" (2 Cor 2:17).

4. It continually seeks acceptance

It is hoped that the sinner, as a result of agreeable church services, will agree with and accept the church's new disposition. At the same time the church has learned to "accept" the sinner. But, more than just accepting the fact that he is a sinner, and that therefore he can't and won't act as a believer, the church is learning to accept the sinner's lifestyle as the norm. After all, the church has done everything it can to present itself as being very much like the sinner in all outward ways; it is no wonder that the church begins to live in every way like the sinner. Hybels is proud of the "thousands of churches and pastors who have altered their music, programming, and preaching to be 'seeker friendly' or 'seeker sensitive.'"⁹ But Paul asked, "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal 1:10).

5. It aims toward friendship and love

These are good things in and of themselves and things that the Bible teaches. But they can be used wrongly as an end in themselves. An indulgent parent, for example, may spoil a child because he or she is seeking the child's friendship and love at all costs.

Churches may go too far in seeking the approval of men, and this motive is difficult to discern. As a pastor for over twenty years, I could easily find examples of church leaders and parents who felt pressured (and often gave in) to push for change in the church because their kids weren't happy. The strain on homes and churches can be great, and even children can make life miserable for parents if they are unhappy at church. Whole churches can be held hostage by unhappy young people who grow weary of traditional church life.

This misuse of a good thing can also carry over into evangelism. We can be so concerned that the sinner likes us and feels love from us that we compromise our very convictions in order to please him. Ironically, as with an indulgent parent, the acquiescence produces anything but friendship and love.

6. It ends in unchanged lives

I am not seeking to be "judgmental" beyond what the Bible presents as the fruits of our profession. We cannot avoid, however, evaluating our philosophies and methodologies on the basis of the final product. "Across the board" or blanket conclusions cannot be drawn about any methodology. Human beings are free moral agents and can respond to God favorably or not in almost any given situation. But observation and common sense would suggest that, where no change of life is displayed as the goal, no change of life will be achieved.

In society, cultural observers may call this "defining deviancy down" or simply finding the lowest common denominator of social behavior. What do we expect, when we have lowered the expectations and redefined the behavior, if our young people rise no higher than the world around them? J.I. Packer's observation is very appropriate: "Reacting against yesterday's legalistic prohibitions regarding tobacco, alcohol, reading matter, public entertainment, dress, cosmetics, and the like, we have become licentious and self-indulgent, unable to see that the summons to separation and cross-bearing has anything to say to us at all."¹⁰

And So...It has been my contention that the Seeker Sensitive movement has lost its way. In fact, it lost its way when it started in a wrong direction. It is not doing what is best for the seeker and is therefore not "sensitive" in a proper Christian sense to him. We are ambassadors, not salesmen. The gospel is a sacred trust, not a product to be repackaged attractively for the masses and sold to the highest bidder.

Works Cited

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3. William Carr Peel & Walt Larimore, Going Public With Your Faith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 20.
4. Pritchard, 123.
5. Brian McLaren, The Church on the Other Side (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 43.
6. George Barna, Church Marketing (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 14.
7. Dobson, 25.
8. Pritchard, 99.
9. Pritchard, 12.
10. J.I. Packer, Truth and Power (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1996), 145.

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