



Is seeker sensitivity a bad thing?

North American Reformed churches today are enjoying a remarkable revival of evangelistic theology and practice, especially in the area of domestic missions. The United Reformed Churches in North America, for example, are establishing church plants all over the continent. In the past decade or two the Canadian Reformed Churches have launched innovative evangelistic ministries in Campfire Summer Bible Camp for children, for example, and Streetlight ministries in the urban core of Hamilton, Ontario. Beyond the borders of the continental Reformed, Tim Keller, for example, is providing thoughtful and creative leadership in the Presbyterian Church of America through his missional and apologetic ministry at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on Manhattan island in New York City.

Bill Hybels meets unchurched Harry and Mary

In light of this renewed enthusiasm for evangelistic outreach, how do we assess seeker-sensitivity? By seeker-sensitivity we have in mind the evangelistic methodology popularized by Bill Hybels (and Robert Schuller before him) and the Willow Creek Community Church just outside of Chicago, Illinois. Hybels is convinced that the church's ministry should be consumer oriented, catering to the felt needs of community seekers, unchurched Harry and Mary in the neighborhood. In this mindset, the character of worship services ought to be heavily informed and influenced by data garnered from local surveys and questionnaires.

With research data in hand, Hybels and friends observed that unchurched Harry and Mary prefer churches with ample parking, for example, short and simple sermons, entertaining services, fun for the kids and positively no requests for money — and a McDonalds on church premises would be nice. Not surprisingly, Willow Creek's weekend services, designed for the unchurched, are polished one-hour professionally produced shows which feature a lot of music and drama and short messages with dumbed-down content. In what follows I will identify some problems with a seeker-sensitive ministry.

I still haven't found what I'm looking for

Identifying the unchurched as "seekers" is imprecise at several levels. It's inaccurate, first of all, in terms of the Bible's definition of a seeker since, biblically speaking, those who seek always find — unlike the unchurched seekers of today's world. Even if the word "seeker" is used in a general (and thus not specifically biblical) way it's far too generous and optimistic about the disposition of the unchurched (though far preferable to the term "pre-Christian" which was in vogue in the early 90s). The world is populated by people who are completely indifferent about, if not hostile to, the Triune God and the Christian message.

Doing God's work in God's way

The innovators of seeker-sensitive ministry can be applauded for their evangelistic objectives so long as they are also faulted for their pragmatic methodology. Doing God's work doesn't mean we can be indifferent about how we do it; we must do God's work in God's way. The Bible, in other words, deter mines not only what churches must do, but how they must do it. The church's ministry, its worship and outreach, must be prescribed by divine instruction and not human opinion polls.

What would the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for example, look like if we subjected it to the preferences of unchurched Harry and Mary? The offensive language about eating flesh and drinking blood would have to be mitigated and modulated to respect human sensibilities (cf. John 6:53-66). The historic practice of fencing the Lord's Table from the unchurched, the unrepentant and the unbelieving would have to be dismissed in view of our society's dislike for discrimination of any kind (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

I've never heard anything like that before

The seeker-sensitivity gurus insist that preachers must crank the gospel down to the level where anyone can walk into church off the street and understand, if not appreciate, what it's all about in the first fifteen minutes. This does not do justice to the offence of the gospel. If Paul's message was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks what makes us think that twenty-first century North Americans will welcome it?

Nothing is gained when the church acts like the world to make the gospel palatable to worldly people. The church is an entirely different culture than the world and the world should know this from the moment it sets foot in the church. The church has its own vocabulary (e.g., sacrament, propitiation), for example, its own calendar (e.g., Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, etc.), its own rituals (e.g., baptism, the Lord's Supper) and its own songs (e.g., psalms and hymns).

We should expect unchurched guests to say after the service, "I've never encountered anything like that before." Where in North American society today would you encounter anything like this? On Oprah's television show? On the pages of the *New York Times*? The church's culture is radically different from the world's culture and we should not be ashamed.

Don't fear the learning curve

Those who visit church for the first time should not be expected to understand everything said and done. As William Willimon argues, this can't even be done with baseball. *"You have to learn the vocabulary, the rules and the culture in order to understand it,"* Willimon writes. *"Being in church is something at least as different as being in a baseball stadium."* The worship service is going to be foreign and mysterious to the guest in church for the first time and it will take months, if not years, for him or her to understand fully the meaning of biblical vocabulary, for example, and the significance of the liturgy.

How may I help you?

While it's true that the church should not be consumer oriented and interested only in customer satisfaction, she should be extraordinarily inviting and helpful to unchurched guests. We should do all within our powers to ensure that guests at our worship services feel welcomed. As Canadian Reformed missiologist Arjan De Visser writes, *"if the gospel is preached effectively and there is commitment, warmth, and love among the believers, the visitor may be impressed and led to conclude: 'God is really among you!'"* (1 Corinthians 14:25)

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