

The Church Growth Movement & ‘Seeker Services’

The Philosophy:

There are many new and ‘exciting’ methods being touted today to grow churches. Leaders of the Church Growth movement, such as Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, have churned out many profitable books and seminars which tell people how to grow big churches.

A central tenant of the Church Growth methods is the belief that in order to effectively draw the lost to the church and win them to Christ, the church must give the unsaved, the ‘seeker’, that which he desires in a church. Rick Warren believes the church must market itself to the desires of the unsaved in the community and change its style to accommodate and attract unbelievers. ‘*We have to start thinking differently*’, he writes, ‘*I think the target on Sunday morning should be the lost. The church should focus on making unbelievers feel comfortable by singing songs they can embrace, by voicing prayers that help them relate, and by preaching messages they can understand*’. (1)

Thousands of churches around the world are beginning to implement the philosophies of Church Growth leaders. Their marketing strategies are often taken directly out of the corporate world. Rick Warren’s mentor is Peter Drucker, the Famous secular motivational speaker. Warren says: ‘*He’s my mentor. I’ve spent 20 years under his tutelage learning about leadership from him*’.

The Church Growth teachings and methods have precipitated a rush by churches to be ‘relevant’ through the use of Rock music, dance, videos, drama and art. *There is a strong entertainment element in the services* and the style of music reflects this. How ‘relevant’ Rick Warren can be was shown when a Christian publication reported the following: ‘*at his Saddleback Church 25th anniversary Rick Warren did something ‘he had wanted to do for a long time’. He sang Jimi Hendrix’s drug drenched song ‘Purple Haze’ to his congregation, accompanied by his ‘praise and worship band*’. (2)

Warren believes that while the message must not change, the methods must change to cater for the unsaved. The question is: *Do the methods affect the message?*

It is of interest to note that there are at least a few mega churches that are holding to an old and God fearing method - *teaching scripture* - Matt.28:19,20 ‘*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*’. The phrase ‘*the end of the world*’ shows that the great commission does not need to change. Some big US churches (eg. John MacArthur’s *Grace church*) have actually grown large while openly *resisting* the new Church Growth methods and even at times exposing the church growth gurus as false. It is possible to grow big churches using opposing methods. Big numbers do not necessarily infer the blessing of God.

Who Are We Catering For?:

The philosophy of catering primarily for the lost in church services is contrary to Scripture.

The church is not primarily for the unsaved but by definition of the Greek word for ‘church’ (‘*ekklesia*’ - the ‘*called out ones*’), it is *for believers*. Church services are for

the ‘*assembling of ourselves together*’, (Heb.10:25). It is *primarily* the gathering of the *saints* in worship, fellowship and teaching. To primarily cater for the unsaved is to ignore much scripture as well as the early history of the church.

All activities in the church meeting presuppose that the participants are believers. In the early Jewish church, after Peter preached the Word of God and called sinners to repentance, thousands were saved. But then the church meetings that followed this revival show clearly the activities carried out: Acts 2:42 ‘*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*’. The ‘*target*’ was not primarily the unsaved, but the believers!

At this point the reader might pine for some consideration here for the unsaved. However, as the believers worship and glorify God in song, in doctrine, in prayer and in teaching, the unsaved will be drawn as the Holy Spirit wills! The proof of this is seen in the verses following: ‘*...Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved*’, (vs.47).

This does not ignore the fact that the believers would witness and be testimonies in their unsaved communities; but *the early church simply did not cater primarily for the unsaved at their meetings!*

Churches that are influenced by Church Growth theology place undue emphasis on meeting the ‘felt needs’ of unbelievers. But Scripture does not indicate we are to be preoccupied with such ‘felt needs’. If we centre our church meetings around the ‘felt needs’ of unbelievers, it would be to the neglect of believers being disciplined and edified through the Word of God, (Heb.5:12 - 6:1-2).

If we allow the unsaved to have what they desire in a church, what will they choose? The answer is simple - they will choose the style and methods *of the world* - in music, entertainment, in preaching, etc. By nature, this will minimise doctrine and lessen the ‘offence’ of the Gospel.

This shift in doctrine and the Gospel is seen in the writings of Church Growth authors. Rick Warren’s best selling book ‘*The Purpose Driven Church*’ is impressive in its practical ideas and desire to win the unchurched. Yet, as several authors have stated: ‘*the use of the Bible in it is almost universally poor*’. (3) This problem with the handling of Scripture is seen in much of Warren’s teaching. In a Sermon: ‘*What the Bible Says About the Role of Women*’, Warren says Lydia in Acts 16 ‘*hosted a church in her home*’; Chloe was a ‘*small group leader*’; Phoebe was a ‘*leader in the church*’ - all statements which are simply not borne out by the text. Warren says of 1Timothy 3:11: ‘*it sounds like the wives of deacons should have these qualifications [for a ‘deaconess’]*’. Yet the passage is clearly referring to qualifications for *husbands!* Later Warren contradicts himself when he says women cannot be elders. But the qualification of ‘*husband of one wife*’ is the same for *both elders and deacons!* Yet he then says ‘*There were obviously women leaders in the church...*’ But this premise has been built from speculations and false interpretations.

Such handling of scripture is perhaps more subtle in ‘*The Purpose Driven Life*’ where Scripture references are simply misused and weak Bible versions are used to bolster claims. (4)

Warren’s handling of doctrine is also seen in his

ecumenical views, which show clearly he sees Catholicism as Christian. This attitude is also why he can have Muslim speakers come to his church as 'guest speakers'. This ecumenical view was shown at a recent Baptist World Alliance Convention where Warren stated: *'I see absolutely zero reason in separating my fellowship from anybody'*. But in so doing has not Warren positioned himself in direct opposition to Scripture which tells us: ***'Come out from among them and be ye separate and touch not the unclean thing'*** (2Cor.6:17); ***'And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness but rather reprove them'***, (Eph.5:11)?

In his books and seminars, Warren sets up 'straw men' and then shoots them down. For example, he says: *'...we are loud. We are really really loud on a weekend service...I say, we're not gonna turn it down...baby boomers want to feel the music, not just hear it...why should every church have the same music?...People can find that God loves variety!'* The 'straw man' erected here is that we all have to have the same music and God dislikes variety. The error is that we give the unsaved what appeals to their flesh.

Warren goes further: *'...to insist that all good music came from music 200 years ago is thinly veiled racism...its cultural elitism saying that all the good music was written 200 years ago...Now for 2,000 years the Holy Spirit has used all kinds of music. And to insist that one particular style of music is more sacred than the other, there is a word for that - its called idolatry'*. But this issue of 18th Century hymns is another 'straw man'. The real issue is: should fleshly music, or that which gives a response in the flesh, be used in church? What should we think of Gal.5:16-26?: ***'...Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh...If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit'***. Are we not to worship God in the ***'beauty of holiness'***? (1Chr.16:29)

Methods do affect the message. It is not hard to see that one of the fruits of the Church Growth Movement is a de-emphasis on the preaching of sin and holiness. With the de-emphasis on doctrinal truth within Church Growth congregations, Christians tend to stay at a shallow level in their understanding of God and Scripture. Consequently, Sanctification is affected.

In Warren's studies negative texts are passed over quickly, (eg. Tim.3:16-4:5; Tit.1:3-11). He says: *'pick positive Scriptures...you want to pick out Scriptures that are very positive'*. But are we not to present the ***'whole counsel of God'*** and ***'rightly divide the Word of truth'***? (Acts 20:20-31; 2Tim.2:15).

Methods do affect the message. The bait you catch them with is the food you may have to keep them with. Rock music, entertainment, meeting social and felt needs, and methods that pander to the flesh of man, will detract from the need for man to see his hopeless and helpless position before a God who is a holy and righteous judge. Without this understanding of sin man cannot be saved!

After the Church Growth methods have come and gone, the real casualty may well be the Gospel itself! The Church Growth movement by philosophy must minimise the *offence* of the Gospel! The Gospel is an offence to the unsaved, (1Cor.1:18,23,24). But Paul was ***'not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth...'***, (Rom.1:16). The word ***'power'*** (*'dunamis'*) here refers to *inherent power of itself*. The Gospel does not need any help or power from outside to make it 'relevant'.

The Church Growth movement has allowed the world to come into the church to take the church into the world. The fruit is false conversions or 'high maintenance' Christians who sap energy and time out of the body of Christ.

One author says: *'The basic idea is to provide something so sensational and appealing that it attracts crowds and stimulates a substantial increase in attendance...The wretched, weary old ways of the world are employed to pack in the people. All sorts of courses are offered in 'Church Growth'. Seminars are held all over the country...in how to attract crowds. Books are written on the theme...Almost any means is considered valid and acceptable as long as it produces the end result of gathering a crowd. Success is the ultimate criterion measured in mass attendance, even if the true final results are miniscule...The basic fact is that the majority of Christians have been deceived'*. (5)

Is the world to determine the strategy of the church? The world is supposed to hate the church, (Jn.15:18)! We are supposed to be different to the world, (Eph 2:2). Surely it must be the Word of God that determines our 'strategy'.

'Seeker Services':

The Church Growth movement specialises in using certain methods to draw unsaved 'seekers' to church services. Yet, *one cannot and will not find the 'seeker sensitive' method of evangelism anywhere in Scripture! There is only one true seeker in Scripture - Jesus!* It is He who ***'is come to seek and to save that which was lost'***, (Lk.19:10). All other 'seeking' usually refers to *believers*. (For example we, as believers, are told to ***'seek ye first the kingdom of God'*** - Matt.6:33). If we need to be 'relevant' and 'sensitive' then why not be sensitive to the real seeker - the Lord Jesus!

'Seeker Sensitive' proponents sometimes use Luke 15 as a passage to justify their position. Luke 15 teaches the parables of 'The Lost Sheep'; 'The Lost Coin' and 'The Lost Son'. However, many teachers fail to realise *the seeker always represents God, not man!* The sheep, coin and the son, represent man. It is the Lord who seeks the lost for ***'there is none that seeketh after God'***, (Rom.3:11).

The disciples were in the beginning not seeking after Jesus - it was Jesus who sought them out and said ***'follow me'***. Was Adam seeking after God when he became a sinner for the first time? Rather, he was hiding as best he could. It was God who *sought him* out in the garden and clothed him. The concept of a true 'seeker', including 'seeker services', is scripturally flawed!

What we 'save' them to is the 'bait' we will have to continually feed them with. If it's Rock music, shallow preaching, a Gospel of love and peace, or fads and entertainment - that is the food the flesh will continually want! *What we win them with we win them to.*

The Gospel is under threat. Unless it is kept pure and presented pure, the results will be like Still Hybrids - lifeless and fruitless. But in its purity the Gospel is indeed ***'the power of God unto salvation'*** and ***'therein is the righteousness of God'***.

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- (1) *Foundation* magazine March/April 2001
- (2) *'O Timothy'*, No.5, 2005
- (3) *'Briefing'*, 7/99
- (4) A helpful booklet is: *'An Analysis of Rick Warren's 'The Purpose Driven Life''* available from this ministry.
- (5) *'Predators In Our Pulpits'* by W. Phillip Keller, P.32