

The Contemporary Church - John H. Armstrong

The rush is on. How contemporary can we really be? How in the world will we ever get the unchurched to come when virtually all they know comes through 30 second sound bytes?

We all know they will not listen to sustained discourse for more than 15 minutes! The contemporary plan is plain for all to see - create a worship service (none dare call it liturgy!) that is fast-paced, light on doctrine, and very heavy on music and drama. We are preoccupied, as a friend puts it, with being "trendier-than-thou." One local paper advertises, "Church Like You've Never Seen It Before!" This is followed by a brief description, all too typical of the trend:

Outstanding Music . . . No choirs or pipe organs here. Our music is crisp, contemporary, professional, and yes, even hot! World Class Drama . . . Each week our Drama Team, "Showcase", presents a dramatic performance specifically designed to enhance the message. Messages . . . Our pastor . . . teaches ageless truths tailored for people in the '90s.

The Dallas Morning News writes similarly:

Shortly before the benediction at Fellowship of Las Colinas last Sunday, the pastor made a gridiron move. Wearing Troy Aikman's jersey, some baggy pants and athletic shoes, the Rev. Edwin "Ed" Barry Young deftly threw a football, not across a yard line but a row of seats. Michael Wood caught the flying pigskin. He and his wife, LaWanna, sporting football game duds, were honored for bringing six friends to church. And hours before the Dallas Cowboys whipped the New York Giants, they got their trophy; a football signed by Dallas' star quarterback.

Other attractive brochures tell me how to have a revival through a popular drama team, with twelve "full scaled revivals" held in the space of twelve months! Conferences and seminars abound on how to market the Gospel through services geared to the felt needs and personal questions of "seekers," a synonym for those who are not Christians but have become interested enough to listen to a "Christianity 101" presentation of the biblical message. Stated very simply, what we have seen over the past ten years is an almost complete abandonment of liturgy, form, creed and formal confessionalism in an ever-increasing number of fast-growth churches. Evangelicals seem to be on a mad pursuit for the perfect contemporary service. More recently many historic churches, who have more directly grown out of the traditions of the Protestant Reformation, have adopted these same patterns.

How Shall We Reach the Unchurched?

This embrace of contemporary public worship patterns is deliberately aimed at the unchurched. Everything done is determined by the question, "How will the unchurched respond to this if we do it?" The central issue in this is not contemporaneity per se. American Evangelicalism has no significant theological reason to maintain a serious interest in so-called "traditional" worship patterns, especially if by traditional they mean the sentimental and human centered services patterned nineteenth century revivalism. Long ago most Evangelicals turned their public worship services in the direction of

focusing upon the needs of those who attend. Debate over style, therefore, is false for several reasons:

1. Much of what is called "traditional" worship in Evangelical churches actually originated in the revivalism of the 19th century and has simply drifted further and further from historic Christian worship patterns for well over a century and a half.
2. Many people are drawn to particular styles of music and thus think the whole debate about "seeker sensitive" worship is simply about style (choruses, etc.), or even instrumentation; e.g. drums, guitars, etc. vs. organs, pianos, etc. What I wish to examine is not style at all, though this is not an unimportant matter, but the vast movement of thought and activity that exists behind these "seeker sensitive" approaches. This thought now permeates almost every denomination and seminary in North America and goes by a number of names, including "Seeker Sensitive Worship" or "Market Driven Ministry." All of this is related to the development and use of what has been called "Church Growth" missiology.

An Explanation Of The Strategy Itself

The Church Growth movement is traceable to a man and an institution - Donald MacGavran, and The School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. Church Growth has several characteristics. We will mention only two of them for our purposes:

1. It deliberately does not find a common basis for mission in doctrine or creed. As long as you believe people are lost without Christ and you believe the church should reach them you affirm the creed! It really is that simple.
2. The movement has an aggressively strong commitment to the use of the social sciences such as sociology, psychology and anthropology, holding the Bible with one hand and the social sciences with the other, all the time affirming, "All truth is God's truth!" The questions this movement would have us ask are: "What are the questions people are asking?" "Where are the natural bridges we can cross?" "How can we speak the language of the market place so that they genuinely hear us?" Church Growth thinking leads to a methodology that is "phenomenological" not "theological." Writes C. Peter Wagner,

That approach (i.e. phenomenological) may appear altogether too subjective to many traditional theologians...As a starting point, church growth often looks to the 'is' previous to the 'ought'!...What Christians experience about God's work in the world and in their lives is not always preceded by careful theological rationalizations. Many times the sequence is just the opposite: theology is shaped by Christian experience.¹

An Evaluation With Special Concern For The Public Worship Of The Church

Further, I must add, this strategy has caused me to think more carefully about the need for clearer communication with the unchurched. There is always a need to examine our preaching and vocabulary at some points. It is incumbent upon us to make the message as plain as possible. Illustrations abound in church history where this need has surfaced. One remembers that the English Awakening began outside of church buildings, a novelty in that age, where George Whitefield began to preach in the "open air." In an age like ours, when people are "spiritual," but adrift without foundations morally or religiously, we must conscientiously work at genuinely making our message plain. Creativity in outreach is a healthy thing if our creativity is consistent with the principles of the scripture. Much of this has caused many to embrace a more meaningful North American contextualization process which asks: How is the Christian message received, appropriated, and interpreted in various contexts? It must be seen, however, that understanding and relating to various subcultures is not, however, a new thing. William Carey did this in India two centuries ago, as did Hudson Taylor in China, and a host of unknown mission pioneers over many centuries.

Another positive contribution can be seen in the "seeker-sensitive" movement's causing many to take seriously the planting of new churches throughout the United States. Questions remain regarding the long term health of many of these newer churches, but the desire to plant churches is a generally healthy trend.

Some Negative Contributions

In spite of all the above positive references many negative concerns still trouble me in regard to this whole "seeker sensitive" preoccupation with attracting the unchurched through contemporary patterns of worship. First, I see a blatant capitulation to consumerism in much of this direction. Many experts in this movement do not hesitate to call their techniques "marketing methods," but this approach breeds an unhealthy individualistic consumerism, which is already pervasive throughout the culture, when Christian leaders treat church growth as the primary activity of the Lord's Day, and the congregational worship service as a virtual business undertaking aimed at getting consumers to "buy the product." When this is done the implications are both obvious and serious:

1. We tend to create casual shoppers if we follow this kind of strategy for public worship. Shoppers will develop a very narrow perception of church life. Why should we "sacrifice" for Christ? If we do not like what this church offers we can go next door, or down the street.
2. There will tend to be a minimalizing emphasis on truth if we follow this strategy. The church is increasingly becoming vulnerable to intellectual dismissal. The consumer has already been reared in a culture that has "closed its mind" as Bloom put it. More mindlessness will only help build a church of unthinking consumers who come and then join for the wrong reasons.
3. Seeking to build a public service oriented to meeting "felt needs" (in particular) will stoke further needs and never satisfies people with a sense of transcendence

which results from biblically informed liturgy and confession. Os Guinness makes the valid point that, "Meeting needs does not always satisfy needs; it often stokes further ones and raises the pressure of eventual disillusionment"² He adds, further:

A generation ago one analyst writes, "Problems existed only in mathematics or chess; solutions were saline or legal, and need was mainly a verb. The expressions 'I have a problem' or 'I have a need' both sounded silly." Today, however, need - used as a noun - has become socially respectable, and even fashionable. "To be ignorant or unconvinced of one's own needs," says Ivan Illich, "has become the unforgivable social act." And unlike natural resources, such as land, needs have no natural limits. There is no end to the needs that can be manufactured and distributed.

"Need," adds Os Guinness, "(is) subject to consumer fashion, (and) becomes shallow, plastic and manipulative." Indeed, the drive to meet "felt needs" can mask the real need that the truth of the Gospel addresses--alienation from God!

A Move Toward Theological Compromise

At the end of the last century theological liberalism told us that we needed to make Christianity attractive, or acceptable, to its "cultured despisers." This type of concern was not new. The very tension of "being in the world" but "not of the world" has always been with the church. What was new was the way liberalism decided to advance the church before the world, namely by reinterpreting the message of the cross in the light of the world's understanding and belief system. The question still is: How close can we get to the world and keep a distinctive message and ministry?

One of the most blatant examples of the compromise which flows out of this can be seen in 1966 World Council of Churches dictum: "The world must set the agenda for the church." I would suggest that this idea, formulated in the crucible of ecumenical dialogue between light and darkness, is not far from the "seeker sensitive" approach adopted through the Church Growth ideology of contemporary evangelicals.

My statement is strong for sure. How can I make it? Because of what can be seen in:

1. The present infatuation with marketing techniques freely used and openly acknowledged supports my conclusion. Consider these nostrums taken from the literature of major "seeker-sensitive" churches in our decade:

"Marketing is essential for a business to operate successfully."

"The Bible is one of the world's great marketing texts."

"The Bible does not warn against the evils of marketing."

"So it behooves us not to spend time bickering about techniques and process."

"Think of your church not as a religious meeting place, but as a service agency--an entity that exists to satisfy people's needs."

"The marketing plan is the Bible of the marketing game; everything happens in the life of the product because the plan wills it."

"It is also critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign."

The New Yorker magazine poignantly laments:

The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future.

2. The simple fact that methodology takes precedence over theology in planning public worship demonstrates my point as well. Elmer Towns, a man who has made a career out of observing growing churches and what causes their numerical success, has written:

Formerly, a doctrinal statement represented the reason for a denomination's existence. Today, methodology is the glue that holds churches together. A statement of ministry defines them and their denominational existence.

As a result of this approach Acts 2:42 is no longer the pattern text for what the church should do in its gatherings: namely, teaching the apostles' doctrine, enjoying fellowship together in the Gospel of grace, breaking the bread of the Lord's Communion and earnest congregational prayer. Our "new" read on this text would be that we meet in order to attract unbelievers through meeting their "felt needs" and making them feel better about themselves and our message.

The old Acts 2:42 agenda seems lame beside this baby-boomer agenda of drama, music, entertainment and self-help-oriented counsel. (Can we really call what is spoken in such services "preaching"? Helpful talks maybe, but not preaching in the sense we see in the New Testament or recovered in the days of the Reformation.)

The sermons preached in these modern settings have interesting titles like:

How Can I Have a Happier Marriage?

How Can I Handle My Money?

How Can I Like My Job?

Am I Caught in an Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) Pattern?

How Did We Get the Bible?

How Can I Be a Better Parent?"
 How Can I Get More Time for Myself?
 How Can I Feel Better About Myself?
 What Would Jesus Say to Madonna?

One prominent seeker-sensitive preacher counsels,
 Limit your preaching to roughly 20 minutes, because boomers don't have much time to spare. And don't forget to keep your messages light and informal, liberally sprinkling them with humor and personal anecdotes.

Marketing strategist George Barna states that Jesus and the apostles were market-sensitive and constantly sought to minister to felt needs. The illustrations used to demonstrate this are: Nicodemus and the woman at the well in John 4. Barna never states how these accounts parallel marketing, but simply asserts that they do. How can one read Acts and the Gospels and equate what one sees there with today's market-driven messages? Sermons in the New Testament are culturally relevant and personally powerful, but that is not the point. What is the common denominator of New Testament preaching is its entire dependence upon Christ and the apostolic revelation. Douglas Webster is surely correct when he writes:

The reason was its ability to sweep aside superficial felt needs and penetrate to deep-seated

spiritual needs. Biblical preaching was God-centered, sin-exposing, self-convicting and life-challenging--the direct opposite of today's light, informal sermons that Christianize self-help and entertain better than they convict.³

In thinking through this whole matter I was quite surprised to find the counsel of a famous earlier American preacher which parallels this approach: Preachers who pick out texts from the Bible and then proceed to give their historic settings, their logical meaning in the context, their place in the theology of the writer, with a few practical reflections appended, are grossly misusing the Bible. Could any procedure be more surely predestined to dullness and futility? Who seriously supposes that, as a matter of fact, one in a hundred of the congregation cares, to start with, what Moses, Isaiah, Paul or John meant in those verses, or came to church deeply concerned about it? Nobody who talks to the public so assumes that the vital interests of the people are located in the meaning of words spoken two thousand years ago. This same famous preacher ended with the following counsel:

All this is good sense and good psychology. . . . Everybody else is using it from first-class teachers to first-class advertisers. Why should so many preachers continue in such belated fashion to neglect it? Let them not end but start with thinking of the auditors' vital needs, and then let the whole sermon be organized around their constructive endeavor to meet those needs.⁴

Is this the counsel of a modern "seeker-sensitive" spokesperson? Or the defense of methodology often offered up in Christianity Today or Leadership? Not at all. This is the counsel of Harry Emerson Fosdick, the most important liberal preacher of the 1920s and 30s in America.

Fifty years ago a theological liberal counseled his generation in the same way modern evangelicals now use the same accepted theory. Fosdick advocated a complete dismantling of corporate worship and preaching as we had known both for centuries.

Modern "seeker-sensitive" worship services do the same.

The Destruction of Congregational Worship

The whole "seeker sensitive" approach presumes that the Lord's Day church gathering is principally for recruiting the unchurched, or evangelizing the lost. This idea can be traced to the "revivalism" of 19th century American experience, where the focus during this era was then moved from the church gathering to worship God, to be edified, to receive the sacraments and to enjoy fellowship with Christ and one another, to "drawing the net," or getting decisions from the lost. This new "seeker-sensitive" approach is just a sharper and more carefully defined (dare we say, "neatly packaged") version of the same approach. It is clearly not Reformational, but even more importantly it is clearly not Biblical.

While we try to entice the world to come to church to hear the Gospel, the New Testament proclaims a powerful church worshipping God going out into the world in order to reach lost (cf. The Book of Acts). True revivals have historically proved again and again, if they prove anything at all, that a revived and healthy church reaches a dying and lost world through its own awakened people. The real problem is that we have a dying and sadly unhealthy church in the late 20th century and we are trying something, it seems at times almost anything, to bring back life. The new way to do this is to attack the "traditional" church and suggest that our problem is to be found in what we do on Sundays. It is argued, "Contemporaneity will bring back the crowds, thus the life of our church." The real problem, however, is not what we do (i.e. in the so-called traditional service), but that we do what we do without power, without careful thought, and without integrity and passion. But a very important question begs to be answered: What really is the biblical reason for the church to gather in public meetings on the Lord's Day? A simple reading of the Scriptures gives an unmistakably clear answer--God-centered, Scripture-directed worship. The New Testament plainly teaches that our corporate worship is for God. Stated in the extreme, for the sake of clearer understanding, public worship will always follow one of two models:

1. Anthropocentric
2. Theocentric

A human focused worship service sounds oxymoronic but it is, in reality, a valid description when you carefully listen to the descriptions given by the teachers of the "seeker-sensitive" model. Where does this model begin? We are urged to focus on the target, i.e. the audience, or the human person. Remember the driving question behind all of this approach is: How can we design our service and shape our ministry in worship so it will be inviting to the person we desire to reach?

The Distinctives of this Approach to Worship are:

1. It produces a different kind of preaching--exposition is "too heavy," thus we need story-laden anecdotal messages, or "McLite" services, as one has called them.

2. It thrives on strained attempt to "be relevant." Anything much more than 20 years old is considered useless. Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, has said on several occasions that he will never quote Charles Spurgeon in his public seeker services. Why? He confidently assures fellow ministers that Spurgeon is outdated and will not speak the language of their modern hearers. I for one am concerned that this creates, intended or otherwise, a "reverse elitism": We are the ones who communicate with our age, but does it not follow from this that Isaiah, Jesus, Paul and John are also irrelevant? They did not have Subarus, after all. The unfortunate result will be a generation that thinks the evangelical movement came from nowhere - with no heritage or roots.

3. There is, in this movement, evidence of a consistent and radical pragmatism. The audience is "sovereign," as we have seen. Why are we in this particular place, doing what we are doing on this particular day? For whom do we gather? The new approach seems to answer, "For man!" The result is a corruption of theology at virtually every point. Take doctrines like human depravity, unconditional election and perseverance. What place do these have in making people feel good about their church experience? What is happening in many large and fast growing churches is profoundly troubling. All of this does not bode well for sermons which will be based upon careful biblical study. An example of this was a sermon I heard in a "seeker- sensitive" service where the pastor preached on the question: "Why Did Moses Strike the Rock?" The answer had nothing to do with the text or the context. What he gave as an answer to this question was the result of psychotherapeutic interpretations of Moses' behavior which were the result of parenting and its influence upon his early childhood years.

A theocentric worship must begin with God, quite obviously. It must begin with an awesome, holy, Creator, who is both transcendent and immanent. He is pure, altogether holy, and dwells in unapproachable light. Those who worship him must realize that he is an all consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29) and therefore, Christ's mediation must be central if we are not on the basis of, to be destroyed in his presence. This approach to worship asks: What does God require of us? It answers, with biblical warrant, that God wants us to worship him in the stupendous truth of who he is and what he has accomplished, not on the basis of what we feel or believe we need (cf. John 4:23,24). Have you ever noticed that Jesus does evangelism by issuing a call for radically God-centered worship! Does this Word also tell us how we are to worship, and what we are to do? The answer of most is, No. This means, practically, that we are free to do whatever we please as long as we are sincere. The Protestant Reformer John Calvin feared this same kind of movement in his day. He observed that "given man's propensity to fashion and worship idols," man will invariably worship such idols if worship is not regulated in some sense by God and his Word.

This historic approach asks: Where does worship begin? It answers, with no hesitation, "With God!" It asks, further, the profound question: How can we shape our public worship in order to glorify God, give Him praise, and trust and delight in him alone? Yes, we must understand the times" (1 Chronicles 12:32), but this does not mean we must start

with the times, or surrender to the times, or adopt the trends of the times in the place of revealed truth.

Other theological problems abound with the "seeker- sensitive" strategy but I will conclude with mention of a few:

Methodological rep

1. The whole approach lacks hermeneutical precision. The approach works just as well with non-evangelicals. Recently, a Chicago newspaper noted that a revival was ongoing in the Unity School of religion in Chicago. What was the approach used to foster this revival? The exact same strategy as that used in seeker-sensitive evangelicalism. If the methodological replace the theological in judging revival, the question of truth will be pushed inside by the question of relevance and success. If unity followed the methodology and achieved similar results, is it not as truly a "revival" as it would be considered in any evangelical context?
2. This movement unintentionally seems to elevate evangelism to a place higher than God and his glory. Evangelism, and that defined in a limited, non-theological manner, becomes the highest priority of theological reflection over methodological sophistication.
3. The Gospel is increasingly lost through contextualization. Robert Schuller, who has made a career out of this approach, popularized it long before it caught on with a multitude "seeker-sensitive" churches.
4. It rarely addresses "real names" with biblical precision and careful teaching. This, in effect, starves people from the only spiritual food that can rescue them.
5. The approach has a distorted and unscriptural view of the sacraments, treating them as optional and irrelevant, thus removing one of the three marks of the church.
6. The model devalues careful, passionate, expository, preaching of the Word of God. The whole movement is not producing the type of preaching that brings conviction or deeply felt brokenness. The Achilles heel of this is seen in its rampant pragmatism . Honest proponents admit that they do it because it "get results." It works! I experienced a classic display of this when I listened to the minister of drama at a famous seeker-sensitive church say to a room of crowded church leaders, "Don't ask for me a biblical basis, I don't need one--It works!" One might be inclined to reply. But what about, "I have become all things to all men...(1 Cor 9:22-23) and Paul is speaking here, not as a marketing pragmatist, but rather as one concerned about human relationships and their effect upon Gospel communication. The point of this text is this: This is how Paul lived among unbelievers, in various kinds of contexts. To accommodate Christian teaching, worship, or witness. In 1 Corinthians 1:17 Paul just as plainly says that there are methods he will not use. These, suggests Paul, have the effect of

tampering with the message. After all, "It is God who causes the growth" (1 Cor 3:7). Do we have confidence in this truth? Can we, in faith, sow and water with prayer and tears, and then trust God's Spirit to prosper the seed of the Gospel message and to thereby bring about the harvest? If we are faithful, then we must ultimately leave the results of our preaching and evangelism with God.

George Barna has written,

If a church studies its market, devises intelligent plans, and implements those plans faithfully, it should see an increase in the number of visitors, new members, and people who accept Christ as their Savior.⁵

A more modest claim comes from a writer who suggests that appealing to "felt needs" can be (in his words) "a `tutor' to lead people to Christ." Whatever happened to the tutor the Bible gave us, namely the Law? Have we lost confidence in the Law and the Gospel? I am afraid the answer of much evangelical religion today is affirmative.

Conclusion

At the time of the Protestant Reformation the whole ministry of the church was freshly challenged by the Word of God. Such a challenge is needed in our time. Protestantism is in desperate need of reformation and nowhere is the more apparent than in our public worship.

In the time of the Reformation John Calvin wrote a tract titled, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," and in it he writes that worship is of first importance, saying, If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehended under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, first of the modes in which God is duly worshipped; and second, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. ⁶

For Calvin, worship was of first importance. But why? Are there not many other areas where the Reformation ought to begin to strive for advance? Calvin defined his position out of a conviction that it was precisely because human beings so easily worship according to their own wisdom, not God's revelation and ultimately saving truth itself collapses when idolatry and self-made worship appear:

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, `Obedience is better than sacrifice.'⁷

He concludes that since God is "grievously offended with the presumption which invents such worship, and threatens it with severe punishment, it is clear that the reformation

which we have introduced was demanded by a strong necessity" (p. 152f). I believe we must begin at precisely the same place. We need, like Calvin, to attack the "external show" (Calvin's words) of religious practice and recover the focus on God and his saving work in Christ, through a focus on Word and Sacrament. The antidote in Calvin's time, as Dr. Robert Godfrey has elsewhere noted, is "godly simplicity." The modern church needs to give itself to such "godly simplicity" in public worship, reclaiming its biblical heritage of liturgy through a thoughtful and scripturally-informed pattern. This pattern must seek to intentionally glorify God, focusing upon him alone as we gather each Lord's Day. If this is to be accomplished, a truly modern reformation will require us to carefully jettison a great deal of what we have accepted over the past ten years. May it please God to cause this to happen soon! Soli Deo Gloria!

Footnotes

- 1 MacArthur, John, *Ashamed of the Gospel*. (West Chester, IL: Crossway), p. 79.
- 2 Guinness, Os, *Dining with Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House)
- 3 Douglas Webster, *Selling Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press)
- 4 John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*. (West Chester, IL: Crossway), p. 81-82.
- 5 *Christianity Today*, June 24, 1994, p. 19.
- 6 *Selected Works and Letters of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), p.126.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

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