

It's Hard to be
Seeker-Sensitive
When You Work for

Jesus

Many of you can testify that Jesus, the better you got to know him, did not fulfill all your needs but sometimes gave you needs you did not have before you met Jesus!



I believe that today's "seekers" are seeking many things, but I am unsure that many of them are seeking a crucified savior or a cruciform life. That's fine since the Bible hardly ever, almost never depicts anybody seeking Jesus. Rather, the story is about God's relentless seeking of us in Christ.



The way I read church history, most of our really great theological mistakes were made in the interest of evangelism. In so wanting to lean over and speak to the world, sometimes we fall in face down.



The seeker ought never to determine the content of the One who is being sought.

William H. Willimon

Preaching at seeker-sensitive services? User friendly church? We preachers have got a problem. And the problem is named Jesus.

On a billboard outside of town I saw, "WE'VE GOT WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR, COME GET IT." Below was the name of a local church, its location, times for services, and website.

Perhaps it's because I work with young adults, but I thought to myself, "I know what these people are looking for—some of it is both immoral and illegal! Is that church giving them that?"

We live in a consumer-driven, avaricious society where everything is turned into a commodity, even the gospel, and life is said to be fulfilled only through our choices, our ability to consume cars and clothes and, even Christ. In such a climate, we must be careful about turning Sunday worship into just another opportunity to say, "Give me some of that."

That's to me the biggest problem in using contemporary music in Sunday worship. It may be true that Charles Wesley or Martin Luther used some popular music of their day in their hymns. However, in our day and culture, contemporary music, including allegedly "Christian" music is owned by Madison Avenue. Advertising and merchandizing dominate the (appropriately named) "music industry." Music is

primarily used to put the make on people, to sell. Once you've heard those rhythms and syncopations for the millionth time in TV ads, it is very difficult to wrest them from the grip of consumerism, almost impossible for them not to transform Jesus into just another means of stroking my narcissistic ego.

Jesus is not simply about meeting my felt needs; he is also about rearranging my needs, not only about fulfilling my desires; he is also about transforming my desires. Jesus is wonderfully nonchalant about so many of my heart-felt desires. It's amazing how many of my needs (material affluence, security, sexual fulfillment, happiness, etc.) appear not in the least to interest Jesus. Many of you can testify that Jesus, the better you got to know him, did not fulfill all your needs but sometimes gave you needs you did not have before you met Jesus!

I recall that great preacher, William Sloane Coffin, telling us Yale students, "I don't see how you attract folk to Jesus, by appealing to their basic selfishness—'Jesus can fix everything that's wrong with you'—and end up offering anything like the self-less, self-denying faith of Jesus."

When, in Seeker Services, do we pull out the cross? When, as we're touting all the benefits of choosing Jesus, do we also say to them, "By the way, Jesus said that anyone who bought into his message would also suffer and die."

I believe that today's "Seekers" are seeking many things, but I am unsure that many of them are seeking a crucified savior or a cruciform life. That's fine since the Bible hardly ever, almost never depicts anybody seeking Jesus. Rather, the story is about God's relentless seeking of us in Christ. Alright, the poor prodigal son (Luke 15) did finally stagger back home to a waiting father, but when he did, the father took over, jerked him around, threw a party, shocked and surprised him, in short, transformed his whole life. Nothing we can know about these alleged "Seekers" is as interesting as what we know of this seeking, searching God.

The more I think about it, all services of Christian worship are "Seeker Services," in that all of them are opportunities to get jumped by the loving, resourceful, seeking God who just loves to seek and to save the lost.

The way I read church history, most of our really great theological mistakes were

made in the interest of evangelism. In so wanting to lean over and speak to the world, sometimes we fall in face down. We give away the store. We pare down the gospel to something that can fit on a bumper sticker, letting the consumer be the judge of just what can be demanded, said, and expected in the name of Jesus. We use the world's means of speaking only too late to realize that the medium has changed the message rather than the message transforming the world.

In the end, we are left with a desiccated gospel, an accommodated Jesus, and a faith that is more a projection of us at our worst rather than a call to be done over, born again, transformed into God's very best.

In a new book, *The New Young Evangelicals*, Wheaton's Robert Webber says that the era of what he calls "pragmatic evangelicalism" is over, the era began by Billy Graham and ending with Bill Hybels, the era whose watchword was, "what's good is what works." The gospel is reduced to a minimalist set of slogans and techniques and "what works" becomes the utilitarian test for what is done and said by the church.

Webber thinks, and I hope he is right, that we have a new generation of younger, smart, evangelicals who respond to orthodoxy, a "thick" theology that is intellectually demanding, they are eclectic about worship, loving the historic sacramental life of the church as well as newer worship forms. We'll see.

Recently, I left a service at a United Methodist Church where I had attempted to preach. I was shaken. The preacher told me, "We've tried to make our services more seeker sensitive." That meant that most of the historic Christian metaphors and images had been expelled from the service, the music was mostly about "me, my, mine," and the preacher chattered throughout the service about "Jesus loves you," with the emphasis on the "you." I came away wondering if the Christian faith could survive another decade on such drivel. By the end of the service, I wanted to stand up and shout, "If there are any of

you Seekers out there, I promise to you that Jesus is ten times more interesting than this!"

I'm as concerned as the next person about the woeful inadequacy of most of our evangelism, our United Methodist membership decline, and all the other signs of our failure to reach out in the name of Christ. We ought to seek Seekers, but we preachers must never forget that we are seeking them in the name of Christ. The Seeker ought never to determine the content of the One who is being sought. You know from your own experience of Sunday worship that one of the great things that sometimes happens is, you come to church seeking consolation, comfort, something to take away some of the pain—and before the service is over, you get something so much better.

You get Jesus in all his glory and demanding wonder. You get discipleship. You came, hoping to find God, only to be transformed by God finding you. This is us at our best. This is what those Seekers are seeking, even if they don't yet know this is what they are seeking.

Tell me that you've got a better Christian rock band than the Baptists across town, that you have a Sunday drama group that could go to Broadway, that all your sermons are in Powerpoint, that last Sunday a hundred Millennials and Boomers joined the church. I'll still want to ask, with Father John, "But did you offer Christ?" □

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which, "while aggressively traditional, still manages to attract lots of Seekers!"