



STATEMENT DC-249

VIEWPOINT

PRO and CON: THE SEEKER-CHURCH MOVEMENT "Seeker-Sensitive for the Sake of the Gospel"

by Mark Mittelberg

In 1975 a church was started in Willow Creek Theater in Palatine, Illinois. Its mission was to reach irreligious people and turn them into fully devoted followers of Christ. Its approach was to present an uncompromisingly biblical message in relevant terms that these people would understand. The founding leaders of this church felt God was calling them to take this approach, which they believe God has since blessed.

In 1995 Willow Creek Community Church celebrated its 20th anniversary in Chicago's United Center with 20,000 in attendance. Far more important than the number of people who attended are the changed lives this number represents. Story after story can be told of previously unchurched men and women who came to understand the message of the cross, who came to personal repentance, and who came into discipling relationships and places of service — all as a result of what God is doing through the ministry of this one church.

Over three years ago the Willow Creek Association began with a mission to help churches turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ. Today this growing network of like-minded ministries includes over 1,600 churches worldwide from more than 70 denominations. They, too, are bringing increasing numbers of unchurched people to faith in Christ.

These churches are central players in the so-called seeker-church movement. The concept of seeker-sensitivity, properly understood, is not new and not controversial — because it's biblical. In fact, the apostle Paul said, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Col. 4:5). He also said, "I have become all things to all people . . . for the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:22-23).

That last phrase is key to the goal of the seeker-church movement, which is for its teachers to proclaim clearly the gospel while remaining true to the commitment of pleasing God, not people (Gal. 1:10). One of the primary ways to please God is to raise the priority of finding lost men and women, who matter deeply to Him, and to present His message to them in understandable terms, using relevant illustrations and effective modes of communication. All of this is with a view to removing unnecessary barriers and helping these people in their journey toward Christ.

This is the same principle behind sound missionary efforts. Missionaries are encouraged not only to articulate the gospel, but also to study the language and culture of the people they hope to reach. Their goal is to contextualize the

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

message and present it in a clear and compelling fashion that will bear fruit and build God's kingdom in that corner of the world.

Unfortunately, we often overlook the need to do this same thing here in North America. As Christians we often forget that our own evangelical subculture is growing more distant from the increasingly secular culture around us. The challenge for *us* is to develop a missions-mindset and determine how to crack the cultural code where we live so we can contextualize the message and effectively reach people in our own back yards.

As always, Jesus is our model. He went out of His way to get close to those He wanted to reach. He spent time with them; He spoke their language; He taught them using illustrations they could understand; and He lovingly challenged them to follow Him.

Jesus took risks for the sake of God's kingdom, and He was misunderstood and criticized for it. In fact, opponents accused Him of being a glutton and a drunkard, but this was guilt-by-association. They disparagingly called Him "the friend of sinners" — a phrase intended as a put-down, but which He took as a compliment. Jesus came to "seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10), and before He left, He said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

The challenge is to engage in this outreach ministry in appropriate ways. It's certainly not easy, and there are inherent dangers. Jesus said sick people need a doctor who will go and help them. But there's always the risk of the doctor catching the disease! And there's the temptation to spend time with the patients but hold back from telling them the full extent of their problem or from prescribing a treatment they won't like.

That's why we caution church leaders to communicate *to* their culture without ever compromising *with* their culture. Sometimes, in the thick of ministry, it's hard to see where to draw that line. It's easy to make mistakes, and many mistakes have been made under the heading of "seeker sensitivity." But many lessons have also been learned, progress has been made, and much fruit is being borne.

Almost daily I hear stories of lives being changed. Not long ago I read a thank-you letter that was sent to one of our pastors from a former skeptic who recently trusted Christ. She was one of 300 new Christians whom we had the privilege of baptizing that month. And the pastor to whom she wrote — the one who baptized her — was *himself* an atheist 15 years ago when his wife first brought him to a seeker-oriented church service. It's stories like these, combined with the biblical imperative to take the gospel to the whole world, that continue to motivate seeker-sensitive churches.

Jesus said, "By their fruit you will know them." Scrutinize this movement carefully — both its teachings and its results — without relying on media reports or secondhand rumors. When you're done, I hope you'll roll up your sleeves and join with us in finding ways to penetrate the culture with the life-transforming message of the gospel.

Mark Mittelberg is the Associate Director of the Willow Creek Association, the evangelism trainer at Willow Creek Community Church, and co-author with Bill Hybels of *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Zondervan, 1994).

"Arguing with Success"

by Douglas Groothuis

You can't argue with success — or so most Americans believe. But you can argue about the meaning of success. The church-growth movement is after success: reaching the largest number of people possible through innovative and

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

culturally relevant means. Healthy churches are growing churches; and, presumably, growth requires updating worship, preaching, and church architecture. We must "become all things to all [people]" in order to win them to Christ (1 Cor. 9:22).

Who could argue with this? Are not many seeker-sensitive churches thriving while other churches are dying? Despite its growing congregations and contagious influence, however, the church-growth movement needs to be evaluated biblically, especially by those who love the church and want it to grow.

American evangelicals have tended to be populist and pragmatic in their thinking. They have yearned to win as many souls to Christ as possible through any biblically permissible means. This zeal, however, has not always been tempered by knowledge. As Os Guinness warns in *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (Baker, 1994), though energetic and inventive, this orientation can lapse into appeals to the lowest common denominator that sacrifice biblical integrity. Simply drawing a crowd and giving people what they want is not the calling of Scripture.

In their zeal for converts, seeker-sensitive churches may convert God's message into a form more likely to impress but less likely to save the unbeliever. If cultural relevance is our guiding principle for evangelism and church growth, we can become irrelevant to God's agenda, for the gospel will always contest, subvert, and make foolish "the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20). We must *engage* the culture biblically by renegotiating its assumptions and calling into question its false gospels, false securities, and false loyalties.

How might some aspects of the church-growth movement be accommodating the gospel message to worldliness? These observations are not blanket indictments. There is a broad range of church-growth strategies — some are compromising to varying degrees while some are perfectly biblical.

First, in order to reach an entertainment-oriented culture, many churches are adopting an approach that dishonors the gravity, depth, and substance of biblical truth. This is sadly evident in many sermons. One megachurch pastor advises that seeker-sensitive pastors preach for no more than 20 minutes on topics taken from the self-help section of the bookstore. These messages must be "light and informal." Instead of offering an antidote to the superficial and mind-numbing distractions of a culture that is addicted to amusement, preachers sometimes resemble talk-show hosts more than impassioned orators of a holy God (1 Pet. 4:11). The banter of mirth often obscures the glory of the gospel. This criticism does not apply equally to all seeker-sensitive churches, but the trend cuts deep and wide.

Second, some church-growth pundits champion the "marketing of the gospel." This notion often goes uncriticized, since advertising permeates nearly every square inch of our culture. If marketing other things works well, why not market the gospel? Marketing attempts to meet an audience's existing desires or create new desires for the purpose of selling a product. Marketing typically appeals to selfishness, covetousness, vanity, and fear. It is the science of psychological manipulation for economic ends.

The gospel is not merchandise that we can buy or sell (Acts 8:18-23). Rather, it is a gift to offer, a gift to receive, and a life to live. Although we must understand the unbeliever's mindset in order to speak the truth in love to him or her (Eph. 4:15), the gospel cannot be converted into a commercial for Christ. Marketing never chastens or offends its potential customers. The gospel repeatedly chastens our self-sufficiency and offends our pride so that we might humbly rest in the sufficiency of Christ (Matt. 11:28-30). Christianity has no customers; it has disciples who are disciples only because they have been brought to their knees before Christ. Jesus initiated His public ministry by exclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). Preaching repentance is utterly alien and antithetical to marketing. Therefore, marketing and evangelism are antagonists, not allies. A church can be advertised, but the gospel cannot be marketed.

Third, the use of contemporary music and drama in worship can diminish the appreciation of God's transcendent holiness, especially if it is presented as a performance for spectators instead of as an offering to God.¹ One churchgoer interviewed for a television special said he wished his church services were longer because they were like "a good

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

movie." It seems he was more entertained than edified. Of course, older music is not always better for worship. Nevertheless, because much of popular culture is intellectually insipid, aesthetically impoverished, and emotionally vapid, contemporary music's incorporation into worship should be done with surgical care. The medium must fit the dignity of the message.

We should thank God for creative ways to evangelize. Church growth through conversion should be our aim. But we must not become anything less than biblical in order to reach as many as possible for Christ (Rom. 12:1-2).

Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D., teaches at Denver Seminary and is the author of *Christianity That Counts* (Baker, 1994).

NOTES

¹See Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "Putting Worship Back in to the Worship Service," in Douglas Groothuis, *Christianity That Counts: Being a Christian in a Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 72-84.