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*THE TENSION BETWEEN  
BIBLICAL PURITY  
AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE  
IN SEEKER CHURCHES*

*PETER J. GRANT, B.A., M.DIV., D.MIN.*

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## VITA

The author of this work is Peter James Grant. Born on May 22, 1955, he was raised and educated in Edinburgh, Scotland. He completed studies at Napier University in Edinburgh and Reading University, College of Estate Management, leading to membership of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and a career as a cost consultant and project manager in the construction industry.

After a conversion experience and involvement in his local church, he heeded God's call to the ministry and came to study in the U.S. He received his B.A. in Pastoral Studies (with Honors in Scholarship) from Moody Bible Institute in 1983 and his M.Div. in Philosophy of Religion from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1986. In 1999 he completed his Doctor of Ministry degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He received several awards for scholarship and evangelism while completing his studies.

He married Becky, a native of Peoria, Illinois in 1986. They then returned to Scotland and Peter began to minister with the Heralds Trust as an evangelist and Bible teacher, speaking throughout Great Britain at churches, conferences, retreats, special services, and evangelistic campaigns.

They returned to Atlanta in 1989 when Peter became the pastor at newly formed Buckhead Community Church (renamed Cumberland Community Church as of April 1999). The church grew steadily starting two other churches in the Atlanta area in 1996 and opening a new \$4.5m facility in the Cumberland area in 1999. Peter and Becky currently reside in Smyrna, Georgia, with their two children, Colin and Fiona.

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## ABSTRACT

Cumberland Community Church, commonly referred to as a 'seeker church', is like many other new churches emerging all over the U.S.A. and around the world. 'Seeker churches' put a greater emphasis on reaching the unchurched through an emphasis on cultural relevance in contemporary services. They have developed their style of ministry by learning from many churches, the more prominent ones being Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, and Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, California. Many of these seeker churches experience success in reaching greater numbers of unchurched people than the traditional churches and see them become followers of Christ.

In arguing for cultural relevance, the proponents of seeker services point to the difficulty of reaching a 20th Century culture with an 18th Century style. The argument is that church services that are comfortable to the majority of believers (because of their familiarity with the church sub-culture) alienate the unchurched. Just as missionaries learn to hold church services in the native language of the unchurched people they are trying to reach, so seeker churches identify with the 'language' and customs of the seeker. In particular, these churches stand ready to adapt the church services to the needs, anxieties, and concerns of the unchurched.

However, there are also voices of concern and criticism asserting that this style of ministry is detracting from the Biblical purity of the church. Their central argument is that putting the emphasis on the unchurched causes the focus on worship and teaching for believers to be diluted and the purity of the church to be compromised.

This thesis argues that it is possible to maintain a balance between Biblical purity and cultural relevance in seeker churches while still impacting the unchurched to a greater extent than in many traditional churches. However, church leaders need to weigh the validity of the concerns and criticisms and deal thoroughly with the unintended consequences of adopting a seeker-focused approach to ministry, particularly where they might accept uncritically the values of the larger movement. It is vital that church leaders have a sound Biblical basis for ministry and understand the relationship between relevance and truth. It is my prayer that this thesis can assist those wrestling with how to reach the unchurched through contemporary services and ministries and maintain Biblical purity in the church.

The purpose of this thesis is to describe the tension between cultural relevance and Biblical purity, to identify and evaluate the concerns being raised about the seeker church movement, and to offer suggestions as to how seeker church leaders can maintain a balance between the need for cultural relevance and biblical purity. This thesis begins with a look at the desire for evangelistic effectiveness and the call for cultural relevance among seeker churches. Next it looks at the call to Biblical purity by the concerned critics of the seeker church movement. These concerns and criticisms will then be evaluated in ensuing chapters, gleaned any useful applications to seeker church ministry.

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## INTRODUCTION

Proponents of seeker churches argue that culturally relevant ministry reaches greater numbers of unchurched or irreligious helping them begin their journey to become fully devoted followers of Christ. Opponents of seeker churches argue that an emphasis on cultural relevance compromises the Biblical purity of the church and hinders the journey to full devotion to Christ.

### **The Purpose of The Thesis**

This thesis explores the central question, “Do seeker churches compromise the Biblical purity of the church for the sake of reaching greater numbers of unchurched people with culturally relevant ministry?” The thesis will show how the problem of evangelistically ineffective churches has given rise to the call for cultural relevance in ministry. It will clarify the call for cultural relevance as defined by seeker churches. The thesis will then clarify the call for Biblical purity by both seeker church proponents and critics. The central argument of the critics is that putting the emphasis on the unchurched causes the focus on worship and teaching for believers to be diluted and the purity of the church to be compromised. The thesis will seek to identify and evaluate all the concerns, cautions, and criticisms of the opponents of seeker churches. It will ask, “What validity do these concerns, cautions, and criticisms have?” The purpose of this thesis is not to present a balanced evaluation of seeker church ministry compared with, say, traditional approaches; nor does it seek to be as strong an apologetic as can possibly be made for seeker church ministry. While the author is a practitioner and advocate of seeker church ministry, this thesis is primarily an attempt to examine and learn from the claims of the critics that Biblical purity has been compromised by a seeker church philosophy of ministry. The thesis will also offer insights which may benefit seeker church leaders in examining if Biblical purity has been compromised in their own churches. The outline of the thesis poses questions that will provide opportunity for reflection regarding different aspects of seeker church ministry.

The thesis uses an exhaustive study of the literature on both sides of the issue combined with the authors attendance at many seeker church conferences and leadership events, wide exposure to seeker churches in the U.S.A. and U.K., and ten years experience in leading a seeker church in Atlanta, GA. The author is also familiar with about a dozen seeker churches in the Atlanta area and meets with the pastors of those and other churches on a monthly basis. Frequently, reference is made to what may be happening in seeker churches regarding possible compromises of Biblical purity or what may be happening in traditional churches regarding cultural irrelevance. These observations are based on some studies and surveys referred to in the footnotes, Appendices, and Bibliography but the majority of observations are based on the authors personal observations. The material presented in Chapter 7 on the foundations for seeker church ministry grew out of these observations and from the tension experienced between Biblical purity and cultural relevance in the early days at Cumberland Community Church (particularly the section on vision/passion).

This thesis argues that it is possible for seeker churches to maintain Biblical purity while being culturally relevant and still impact the unchurched to a greater extent than in many traditional churches. However, church leaders need to weigh the validity of the concerns and criticisms and deal thoroughly with the unintended consequences of adopting a seeker-focused approach to ministry, particularly where they might accept uncritically the values of the larger movement. This thesis will provide insights for seeker church leaders into how to maintain culturally relevant ministry without compromising Biblical purity and how to have a sound Biblical basis for seeker ministry. Even greater effectiveness can result when we build culturally relevant ministries on a solid Biblical foundation.

### **Background**

I believe most seeker church leaders are driven by a passionate desire to restore the evangelistic effectiveness of the church through its operation as a Biblical community empowered by the Spirit of God. I know this is true in my case. Although I had attended church as a youngster growing up in Scotland, I had wandered into a spiritual wasteland and at age twenty was a skeptical agnostic when someone gave me a copy of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis.<sup>1</sup> I read it immediately and was astounded that a Christian could think and write so well! Then I was invited to church; I sat through a church service that would have compounded my doubt and skepticism--except for an invitation I received to an event after the main service. This was a gospel concert similar to many of today's seeker services. Unlike the people I had met in the church service, I was surprised by how normal these people were! In addition, unlike the church service, the music was great! A clear gospel message left me stunned and asking questions; I waited behind to argue with the main speaker. Hours later,

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow, U.K.: Collins: Fount Paperbacks, 1952).

after patiently answering my questions, he led me in a simple prayer and I placed my trust in Jesus Christ. My life was transformed. A heavy burden of sin and guilt lifted; I remember feeling truly clean for the first time in my life and being aware that I had experienced something truly supernatural.

## The Longing for an Evangelistically Effective Church

I joined that church and sat under good teaching for several years. But this was an evangelistically ineffective church. My frustrations were alleviated, however, by becoming involved with the gospel music group that had led me to Christ. They were all lay people who had a passion for effective evangelism and played in churches, theaters, and clubs—anywhere they could get a hearing—and saw many conversions to Christ. Seeing people come to Christ almost everywhere but in my local church was very frustrating. When my career took me to the Shetland Islands during the oil-boom years of the late seventies, I realized sadly that this dearth of evangelistic effectiveness in the local church was a common experience in many other churches in the U.K.

Eventually, I sensed God call me to study for the ministry and left my career as a construction cost consultant. I went to Chicago and studied at Moody Bible Institute and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Again, despite attending great “teaching-center” churches, my experience of local churches left me searching and longing for an evangelistically effective local church.

Then I stumbled into Willow Creek Community Church. I attended for several years in the mid-80’s. Week after week I would sit stunned by the clear and compelling communication of the gospel. Often, as everyone would stand for closing prayer, I would sit back down and, sometimes weeping, ask God to let me lead such a church, large or small, anywhere in the world, preferably in the U.K.! I was not aware of their “strategy” or “philosophy of ministry” and neither were many of my friends who attended. I was aware, however, the leadership seemed to be deeply committed to God, they communicated his Word, and they treated non-believers with the respect I knew was needed. And I knew that I had found, at last, an evangelistically effective church. With that dream in my heart I returned to Scotland to engage in evangelistic and Bible teaching ministry. After several years, I answered a call from a small group of people to come to Atlanta from Scotland to be the first pastor of their new church. Fortunately they too had a similar dream and I have now been pastoring that seeker church, Cumberland Community Church, for eleven years. In the last eleven years we have seen many conversions, started two daughter churches in the Atlanta area and will be opening a new ministry center in August 1999. In the midst of ministry, we live with the constant tension between cultural relevance and Biblical purity.

## What is the Seeker Church Movement and Who Are Its Critics?

Many nuances exist within the seeker church movement; some churches would label themselves seeker-driven, seeker-targeted, seeker-friendly, user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, etc.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, it is not necessary to distinguish between each style. The descriptive “seeker,” “seeker-oriented,” or “seeker-sensitive” church movement is used in this thesis to refer to the movement as a whole without distinction, that is, that growing number of churches that put a high priority on reaching spiritual seekers through culturally relevant ministry.<sup>3</sup>

This movement encompasses many churches from different traditions and denominations, each discovering Biblical principles and strategies to reach seekers. For example, George Hunter has studied hundreds of congregations and uses the term “apostolic congregations” to describe those willing to be culturally flexible in order to reach people. In his book, *How To Reach Secular People*, he says such congregations take ten issues very seriously, most of which relate directly to loving lost people. These issues are:

- 1) *People who aren't disciples are lost.*
- 2) *Lost people matter to God.*
- 3) *Church is primarily a mission to lost people, not primarily a gathered colony of the faithful.*
- 4) *The importance of high expectations for their people.*
- 5) *(Knowing) what to change and what to preserve.*

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<sup>2</sup> And some would be seeker-hostile without knowing it! One Christian leader admitted after being introduced to the seeker church movement that he realized he had been treating lost people as if they were the enemy!

<sup>3</sup> Jim Dethmer, former teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, distinguishes between churches reaching ‘non-churched, non-Christians’, ‘non-churched Christians’, ‘churched non-Christians’, and ‘churched Christians’. Seeker-targeted churches generally see themselves reaching non-churched non-Christians. “The Unchurched: Understanding Them to Reach Them.” *The Pastors Update* (April 1992): 1. Additionally, using Sally Morgenthaler’s definitions, the terms ‘seeker’ and ‘unbeliever’ refer to someone who does not have a relationship with Jesus Christ; the term ‘unchurched’ refers to those who have not attended church for six months or more (excluding weddings, funerals, Christmas and Easter); in *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers Into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 10. Additionally, Greg Pritchard makes a helpful distinction between different types of seeker. Using Willow Creek’s descriptive ‘Unchurched Harry and Mary’ he describes three types of ‘Harry’ 1) ‘Hostile Harry’: atheistic or agnostic or may believe in God but negative toward Christianity. 2) ‘Curious Harry’: spiritually intrigued and interested in the message; probably spiritually minded but negative toward organized Christianity; believes in God but not in church; semi-churched, perhaps the bulk of Willow Creek seekers. 3) ‘Sincere Harry’: commitment to seeking at Willow Creek. Pritchard emphasizes that conversion is a process that often takes ‘Harry’ from hostile to sincere to faith in Christ (in G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996], 69ff.).

6) *The importance of understanding, loving, and liking secular people.* 7) *The importance of accepting unchurched people.* 8) *The importance of using music that secular people understand.* 9) *The importance of starting new congregations.* 10) *The importance of involvement in world missions.*<sup>4</sup>

While the movement is larger than any single church, several churches have been used by God to pioneer such ministry; Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Valley Community Church are two of the most influential.<sup>5</sup> Greg Pritchard describes four waves of influence Willow Creek has had;

*Willow Creek's first wave of influence is through the basic operation of its ministries and the size of the church itself. . . . The second wave is made up of hundreds of churches that have adopted a Willow Creek style seeker service designed for the unchurched. . . . The third wave of influence is the thousands of churches and pastors who have altered their music, programming, and preaching to be "seeker friendly" or "seeker sensitive." . . . In the fourth wave of influence are the thousands of churches and individuals around the world who have been influenced by the Willow Creek programs, principles, books, and tools that the church has produced.*<sup>6</sup>

Attendance at Willow Creek Church Leadership Conferences was 30 in 1985, 2000 in 1990, and 8,000 in 1995. In 1992 the Willow Creek Association (W.C.A.) was formed—"an international network of outreach oriented churches." The W.C.A. now has over 2,500 loosely affiliated member churches or organizations in the U.S. and over 1,500 affiliates in countries worldwide.<sup>7</sup> As many as one fifth of all churches now claim to have some kind of seeker service.<sup>8</sup> Saddleback Valley Community Church, and its pastor Rick Warren, likewise is has a significant impact, particularly in the southern U.S., among Southern Baptists, through annual conferences and through his book *The Purpose Driven Church*.<sup>9</sup>

I believe the movement toward seeker-oriented churches is happening because believers long to move from maintaining the programs of the church as an institution to experiencing the power of the church as mission. God designed the church--and us--for this purpose! Bill Hybels, Senior Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, defines the seeker-sensitive movement as, ". . . nothing more than a growing awareness among thousands of church leaders that local churches lost their evangelistic effectiveness many decades ago and that something should be done about it."<sup>10</sup>

The main critics of the seeker church movement are listed in the Bibliography. All of the listed works have been read for this thesis and their concerns and criticisms evaluated. Some of the critics are currently serving, or have served, as pastors or in parachurch ministry (Norman Anderson, Michael Horton, Bill Hull, John MacArthur, John Seel, Douglas Webster, Robert Wenz, and William Willimon). Some are theologians (John Armstrong, Douglas Groothuis, Marva Dawn, Donald McCullough, and David Wells). Some comment on the movement from a sociological or cultural perspective (Os Guinness, James Davison Hunter, Kimon Howland Sargeant, Greg Pritchard, and Kenneth Myers). Some of the critics are described best as cautious advocates (Sally Morgenthaler, Joseph M. Stowell); some seem to take delight in uncharitable attitudes to evangelistically effective churches. But from all can be gleaned helpful insights.

## What are The Characteristics of Seeker Churches?

Seeker churches have the following characteristics: 1) A high priority on reaching the lost; 2) A belief that evangelism is a process and an event; 3) A contextualized presentation of the Gospel for seekers; and 4) A process by which the new believer can mature.

### 1. A High Priority On Reaching The Lost

As Bill Hybels of Willow Creek says, "Lost people matter to God." It may seem obvious, but seeker-oriented churches have an orientation toward seekers. This means they long to be evangelistically effective not just transferring the sheep

<sup>4</sup> George G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 144-170.

<sup>5</sup> Willow Creek Community Church, started in 1975, now has an average weekly attendance of 16,000 and baptizes many hundreds of believers annually. Similarly, according to Rick Warren, "during Saddleback's first fifteen years, over 7,000 people gave their lives to Christ" at the church (in *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995], 248).

<sup>6</sup> G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> As of March 26, 1999 The W.C.A. had 2,434 churches and 105 ministries (parachurch, denominational headquarters, etc.) affiliated with it. Additionally, some 211 churches and ministries from 24 countries around the world were affiliated with the U.S. W.C.A. Five countries had formed their own affiliated associations (U.K., Australia, Germany, New Zealand, and the Netherlands) comprising an additional 1,360 members. Kimon Howland Sargeant says, "by institutionalizing the strategy and vision of Willow creek, the Association has embraced the mantle of leadership for this movement." (Kimon Howland Sargeant. *Faith and Fulfillment: Willow Creek and the Future of Evangelicalism*, Ph.D. diss. [University of Virginia, 1996], 27).

<sup>8</sup> George Barna, *Evangelism that Works*, cited in *Willow Creek Monthly*, August 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Bill Hybels, "Selling Out the House of God? Bill Hybels Answers Critics of the Seeker-Church Movement (Interview by Michael G Maudlin, Edward Gilbreath, and Kevin A Miller)," *Christianity Today* 38 (18 July 1994): 21. He further acknowledges that, "There are also many traditional church that are effective in evangelism and have well-rounded ministries, without necessarily being contemporary and seeker driven." (p.22).

from other flocks or waiting for the birth of more lambs to the existing sheep!<sup>11</sup> This priority also means sometimes the needs of the seeker must take priority over the needs of the believer in the programs of the church. It means church leaders deliberately ask what they can do to help lost sheep come into the fold. They identify with the lostness reflected in the seekers' version of Psalm 23:

*I have no shepherd.  
I want and am in need.  
I have no one to feed me in green pastures.  
I have no rest.  
I have no one to lead me to quiet waters.  
I am thirsty.  
I have no one to restore my anxious and despairing soul.  
I find no one to guide me in right ways.  
I don't know where to turn.  
As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, evil surrounds me.  
I am terribly afraid, for no one is with me to comfort me.  
I have no feast prepared for me.  
I am overwhelmed by my enemies.  
No one anoints my wounds or fills my cup.  
My cup is empty.  
All the days of my life are filled with disappointments and deceit.  
I have no home for eternity.  
Will I dwell in the house evil forever?<sup>12</sup>*

## 2. A Belief That Evangelism Is A Process And An Event

They have a strong emphasis on relational or lifestyle evangelism--believers developing relationships with unchurched friends and neighbors and sharing a word of witness with them. George Hunter says,

*From the time of Constantine's conversion to the Renaissance, the Western church scored like a football team with home-field advantage. In many ways the challenge of communicating the gospel to a secular culture is similar to the task the first-century church faced. In both situations it is necessary to inform people of the basic facts, to influence them to have a positive attitude toward Christianity, to convince them that the gospel is true over against other religions, and finally invite them to follow Christ. Secularization has advanced to the point that Christian communicators can no longer begin with an invitation without going through the first three steps.<sup>13</sup>*

Effective evangelism as a process is evident in this list of 15 vital signs of contagious churches taken from the book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*:<sup>14</sup>

1. *Evangelism is a Basic Value*
2. *Lost People are Prioritized*
3. *Outreach is Part of the Overall Strategy*
4. *The Seeking Process is Respected and Facilitated*
  
5. *Seekers' Questions are Valued and Addressed*
6. *The Leaders Model the Reaching of Lost People*
7. *The Members are Equipped to Spread Their Faith*
8. *Relationships with Unchurched People are Maximized*
9. *Varied Approaches to Evangelism are Celebrated*
10. *Every Position of Service is Viewed as Part of the Outreach of the Church*
11. *The Efforts of Individual Members are Supplemented by Larger Outreach Events*

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<sup>11</sup> James White relates, "One pastor informed me that his Baptist church could not grow any larger because there were no more Baptists in the area. Though this is an extreme, it betrays the underlying attitude of many churches and their leaders." Jim White, "Defining the Seeker-Targeted Approach," *Lead On: Ideas for Young Leaders* (Fall 1994): 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Interest Magazine* (July/August 1992): 31.

<sup>13</sup> George Hunter, "Can the West Be Won?" *Christianity Today*, Dec 16, 1991: 43-46.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 197-210. {Hybels 1994: pp197-210}

12. *Innovation is Valued and Employed*
13. *The Relevancy (sic) of the Bible is Emphasized*
14. *The Gospel is Never Compromised*
15. *There's a Tangible Sense of the Supernatural*

### **3. A Contextualized Presentation Of The Gospel For Seekers**

This is usually but not always during a seeker service on a Sunday morning. Seeker churches recognize that an unbeliever, when he or she eventually comes to church, needs time and space to investigate the claims of Christ and to hear the gospel in a culturally relevant style. A seeker service or seeker events offer time to make many incremental decisions in an environment of grace and truth.<sup>15</sup>

### **4. A Process By Which The New Believer Can Mature.**

This takes the new believer from the place of decision to follow Christ into a growing relationship with Christ and his church. This involves growth in grace through understanding and experiencing worship, Biblical community, serving, giving, and evangelizing.

The third of these characteristics--giving a contextualized presentation of the gospel in the context of a seeker service--is the third step in Willow Creek's seven-step strategy.<sup>16</sup> The tensions that arise in the overall ministry of the church from so doing--is the focus of this thesis. This approach has provoked much controversy. The arguments are often heated and couched in terms that obscure reasoned dialogue. Greg Pritchard has observed:

*In the midst of such a rhetorical battle, often one's first motivation is to win rather than to truly understand one's opponents. Each side tends to talk past the other. As a result, neither side truly understands the other and polemic points are won at the expense of the facts. Arguments are advanced, but truth is a casualty. Defenders react against what they feel are inaccurate or distorted critiques but often don't listen to legitimate questions from their evangelical brethren. Sometimes critics have targeted what they believe is a compromise of the faith but have not adequately studied those who adhere to what they are critiquing.<sup>17</sup>*

This thesis is an attempt to bring some light to the heat.

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<sup>15</sup> Greg Pritchard notes "In practice, Willow Creek's commitment to reach the unchurched is the axis of its ministry. In particular, the weekend seeker service is the central and dominating activity at Willow Creek. More time and energy goes into the weekend service than any of the other activities at Willow Creek." Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix B Willow Creek's 7-Step Strategy. The seven steps are 1) Build relationships of integrity with unchurched friends 2) Share a verbal witness 3) Invite to a service for seekers 4) Become part of the New Community (service for believers) 5) Participate in a small group 6) Serve in the Body of Christ 7) Steward Financial Resources.

<sup>17</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 13.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM OF EVANGELISTICALLY INEFFECTIVE CHURCHES

*“The Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing places of residence.” Helmut Thelicke*

#### **Introduction**

An abundance of statistics suggests that most churches in the Western world are not regularly winning people to faith in Christ. Many churches rarely see a new convert from one year to the next and for too many pastors, leaders, and churchgoers the joy of sharing their faith or leading someone to Christ is the exception rather than the norm. No doubt, there are many causes for this state of affairs. One of the major ones is that the church has lost its ability to engage in conversation with the culture—it has become culturally irrelevant. This chapter examines the problem of cultural irrelevance and the attitudes that cause so many churches to be evangelistically ineffective.<sup>1</sup>

All style issues, traditional or contemporary, are secondary to the question that needs to be asked: Why are more churches not evangelistically effective? This subject should not even be discussed without a broken heart. The church after all is the bride and body of Christ. How has it happened that an experience as incredible as being in the presence of the Living God (Ephesians 2:22), a message as powerful as the gospel (Romans 1:16), relationships as awesome as those with the household of faith (Acts 2:42-47), service as meaningful as serving God (1 Peter 4:11) and a mission as expansive as making disciples throughout the world (Matthew 28:19-20) have all become ineffective in producing new followers of Christ? This is a sin against God. Yet it is being committed in churches everywhere—to be seen at its worst on Sunday mornings between 11 and 12 o'clock. A major part of the problem lies in the church's bondage to cultural traditions, methods, styles, strategies, and programs that do not allow the life and power of God to be seen in the church by the seeker.

#### **The Problem of Cultural Irrelevance**

In resisting the seeker church movement and its ideas, many give the impression that they are defending a *Biblical sub-culture* when in fact they are defending a *sub-Biblical culture*. As Biblically based communities, churches will always stand apart from the larger secular culture. As different from and as a smaller part of the larger culture, churches will always be a *sub-culture* (and, some would add, a counter-culture). However, for a church to have different cultural values and allegiances from the larger secular culture may or may not mean that it is a *Biblical sub-culture*. If Biblical practices are the standard for a church to be a *Biblical sub-culture*, then when its practices are not Biblical they are sub-standard—a *sub-Biblical culture*. This *sub-Biblical culture* keeps many away from Christ. When secular people are asked by George Hunter, “What keeps people like you from considering the Christian faith?” they reply in essence, because they, “don't want to become like church people”, which they assume they have to do before becoming Christians.<sup>2</sup> If the church is going to break free from being evangelistically ineffective, it will have to deal with the worst features of its sub-Biblical culture—*isolationism, inauthenticity, traditionalism, indifference, and judgmentalism*.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Isolationism--‘We’re Safer!’***

Many books on effective evangelism have addressed the issue of how the church relates to the world. To be “in the world” but “not of the world” holds the key to reaching the world without being changed by it. Rick Warren describes three possible responses by the church to culture—imitation, isolation or infiltration. Speaking of isolationists he says,

*(They) fail to see the distinction between the sinful values of our culture and the nonsinful customs, styles, and preferences that each generation develops. They reject new translations of Scripture, current musical styles, and any attempt to modify man-made traditions, such*

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<sup>1</sup> David Wells thinks that talk of the “stagnation of the evangelical world” by seeker church leaders is a comment on “the comparative smallness” of the “traditional churches”. However, the main concern of most of the seeker church leaders I know is evangelistic ineffectiveness, not size. David F. Wells, “Marketing the Church: Analysis and Assessment, Part 1,” *Faith and Mission* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 8.

<sup>2</sup> George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 59.

<sup>3</sup> On reading the draft thesis several readers suggested that ‘survivalism’ was a prevalent attitude—the defeatist idea that the church cannot win the lost and through fear or lack of faith wants to pull up the drawbridge to the world. One reader said, “Many churches are locked into a fear of changing because they operate out of a survival mode vs. a growth (health) mode.”

*as the time and order of the worship service that they are accustomed to. Isolationists sometimes have a dress code, and a list of what is permissible and what isn't regarding issues that the Bible is silent on.<sup>4</sup>*

Isolationism may make us feel safe from the influx of the world and its ways into the church. But it also erects many non-Biblical, cultural barriers that prevent seekers coming to faith in Christ. John Smith, Australian church leader, says, “We’ve asked the unchurched to go through a painful circumcision in order to become a Christian.”<sup>5</sup>

Not all isolationism results from the intentional pursuit of separation from the world. Even members and leaders who would share concern about reaching the world can become practical isolationists due to being absorbed in church activities. The ministries and programs of the church can keep them so busy from Sunday to Saturday that effective evangelism becomes a practical impossibility even while it is a theoretical goal. Bill Hybels reflects on this malaise seen in many churches stemming from the role that pastors play:

*To be truthful, most churches aren't actively engaged in reaching people. In fact, let's get real honest about what happens in a lot of them. Not your church or mine, of course, but with too many pastors in traditional churches on the corner of Elm and Vine.*

*After they get out of seminary, these pastors are assigned a little flock of sheep and given a pen to keep them in. They see their job primarily as keeping the existing sheep safely within that corral. So they feed them a little, they give them something to drink, they pat them on the head, and if the sheep get too close to the fence, they warn, “Get back! Get back!” From time to time, they even shear the sheep, but not too closely. And they encourage them to give birth to little lambs, because that's the way the church grows. If they perform well, then in a few years they receive a bigger flock and a larger pen. And if they do that three or four times without fouling up, they're moved to headquarters, where they don't even have to mess with sheep anymore!*

*Is that cynical? OK, maybe it is. But there's also some truth in there.<sup>6</sup>*

A tradition of separation compounded with a tradition of the Christian life revolving around the activities of the church and a tradition of pastoral sheep-watching at the expense of pastoral soul-winning results in an isolationism that cripples effective evangelism. Consequently, the church becomes even more culturally irrelevant. As Jim Petersen says,

*Christians who keep to themselves, who do not experience a continuing influx of people just arriving from the dominion of darkness, soon isolate themselves within their own subculture. Receiving no feedback from people fresh from the world, they forget what it's like out there. Peculiar language codes, behavioral patterns, and communication techniques emerge that have meaning only for the insiders. As such, a local body becomes increasingly ingrown. It also becomes stranger and stranger to outsiders. Eventually, communication with the man on the street is impossible.<sup>7</sup>*

### ***Inauthenticity--“We’re Just Fine!”***

Many unchurched people recoil from Christianity because of the caricatures and hypocrisy they see (or think they see) in real life, in the media and on “Christian” television programs. If they come to church and sense the same pretense they will not stay long—they need and want an authentic experience of Christianity. They are skeptical of forms of religion that seem pre-occupied with the formal and the ceremonial, whether in the pulpit or the pew. Inauthenticity can be presumed by the seeker for any number of reasons—if the pastor seems to enjoy hearing himself speak, if the vocalists parade like “Sandy Patti wanna-be’s,” if the people appear to be over-focused on “dressed up for church,” if emotions are stifled, if the atmosphere is formal and strained, if the announcements are stiff, if the greeters are going through the motions, etc. They find it hard to relate to a religious experience that seems to prize the accumulation of knowledge at the expense of the growth of the soul. They also are deeply skeptical of the happy-clappy Christianity that offers two-cent answers for thousand dollar questions—“just have faith” and “wealthy is healthy” do not cut it! They come looking for hypocrisy perhaps hoping to find authenticity.

### ***Traditionalism--“We’re Used To It!”***

Traditionalism is not just a problem for liturgical or confessional churches. Many independent churches and those who would consider themselves to follow “low church” practices can put up just as many cultural barriers to the unchurched through their traditions—especially where those traditions cannot be changed in a seeker service.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 236.

<sup>5</sup> John Smith, *Bringing the Gospel to a Secular World*, in Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers Into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 127.

<sup>6</sup> Bill and Lynn Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 168.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Petersen, *Living Proof: Sharing the Gospel Naturally* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1989), 56.

<sup>8</sup> I recently attended a church where Baptist preacher jokes (meaningful only to the initiated), an altar call, and an invitation to pursue church membership were included in a seeker service—all part of the “traditions” of that particular church.

Jaroslav Pelikan's distinction between traditionalism and tradition is helpful: "Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition is the living faith of the dead."<sup>9</sup> The dead faith of the living that resists change merely because it is change, encourages an idolatrous reverence of yesterday's methods, and tries to impose them on today's church.<sup>10</sup> It is little surprise that in a survey of 600 pastors of seeker churches Kimon Sargeant asked, "What are the key strategies for seeker churches?" 82.1% agreed that "being relevant to seekers is more important than maintaining the traditions of the church."<sup>11</sup> Leith Anderson makes the following point:

*While the New Testament speaks often about churches, it is surprisingly silent about many matters that we associate with church structure and life. There is no mention of architecture, pulpits, lengths of typical sermons, or rules for having a Sunday school. Little is said about style of music, order of worship, or times of church gatherings. There were no Bibles, denominations, camps, pastors' conferences, or board meeting minutes.*

*Those who strive to be New Testament churches must seek to live its principles and absolutes, not reproduce the details. We don't know many of the details, and if we reproduced the ones we do know, we would end up with synagogues, speaking Greek, and the divisive sins of the Corinthians.<sup>12</sup>*

Traditions could continue *ad infinitum* if the only need was maintaining the familiar for the sake of believers. Sadly, many take this view and have lost sight of the seekers for whom tradition must sometimes be altered. I am reminded of the pastor who was encouraging his congregation to try seeker services. He was scolded by an "evangelistically-challenged" church member, "Jesus doesn't want or need all this contemporary music, drama, and talk about relevance in his church and neither do I!" To which he replied, "We're not trying to reach Jesus or you; we're trying to reach people who don't know Jesus!"

Traditionalism can result in an erosion of meaning and significance even for the most vital rituals, as the following story illustrates: Years ago, in Russia, a czar came upon a lonely sentry standing at attention in a secluded corner of the palace garden. "What are you guarding," asked the czar. "I don't know. The captain ordered me to this post," the sentry replied. The czar called the captain. His answer: "Written regulations specify a guard was to be assigned to that area." The czar ordered a search to find out why. The archives finally yielded the reason. Years before, Catherine the Great had planted a rose bush in that corner. She ordered a sentry to protect it for that evening. One hundred years later, sentries were still guarding the now barren spot . . .<sup>13</sup>

### ***Indifference--It's Good Enough!***

Too many churches, through their programs, preaching, and facilities, have settled for indifference. Believers readily endure third-rate facilities, shabby sanctuaries, outdated music, long and boring messages, and the self-centered concerns of the congregation. Given such an experience the question needs to be asked, "What would compel the unchurched to visit—and return?" One author puts it this way, "The traditional church has a habit of mind that excuses mediocrity because it is a volunteer organization that is trying to please all sides of the constituency (congregation) as inexpensively as possible."<sup>14</sup>

Is it mere coincidence that indifferent churches rarely see new converts? The prevalence of shoddy facilities and insincere, inauthentic, passionless, programs and preaching may be acceptable to many but seekers and seeker church leaders are not among them. These issues need to be addressed--and the sooner the better. One author writes of the danger of wanting to "transform the church into something that the world finds impressive."<sup>15</sup> But should we allow church to leave an impression it was never meant to leave--that God is pleased with mediocrity, and the message of the church is boring and irrelevant? The church may never be impressive to the world but it will always leave an impression. The word impressive and impression are related; *impressive* implies a posturing on the part of the sender, *impression* implies a response on the part of receiver. If the unbeliever's impression of the church is something that can be changed for the better while at the same time the church can better fulfill its purposes why should the church not change? Several truisms address the urgency of seeing seekers come back to hear the gospel, "You never get a second chance to make a first

<sup>9</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan in an interview in *U.S. News & World Report* (June 26, 1989) quoted in *Christianity Today*, (Vol. 33, no. 13).

<sup>10</sup> Bill Hull recounts, "A freshman United States Senator commented to a thirty-year veteran, 'Senator, I bet you have seen hundred of changes during your time in Congress.' 'Yes,' said the seasoned senator, 'and I've been against everyone of them'; in *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell Co., 1988), 46.

<sup>11</sup> [Kimon H. Sargeant, "Willow Creek Association Member Survey" \(1995\): 4.](#) See a summary of the survey in Appendix G. [\(Sargeant 1995: p4\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Leith Anderson, \*A Church for the 21st Century\* \(Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1992\), 62.](#)

<sup>13</sup> From the authors notes--source unknown.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas D. Webster, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

impression” and, “First impressions are lasting impressions.” Attitudes of indifference regarding the importance of first impressions betray an indifference to reaching the unchurched.

### **Judgmentalism--‘We’re Right!’**

The firm cultural barriers intentionally or unintentionally erected by the isolationists may lead to an attitude of “them and us” judgments imposed on the world for its differences. Unfortunately, not all the judgments that maintain the barriers are Biblical ones:

*The Christian tends to measure the nonChristian against a rather ad hoc list of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The list is a mixture of clear-cut commands from the Word of God, such as “do not commit adultery” along with the relative issues which come from our traditions, such as total abstinence from alcohol.*

*The nonChristian picks up the vibrations and feels he is judged. He sometimes even apologizes for his unacceptable habits, indicating that he feels he has fallen into the hands of someone bent on reforming him. Where there are such judgements, communication is hopeless.<sup>16</sup>*

We can unintentionally give the idea that God has more time for people who hold forceful views on morality and people who are right on all the right issues. Some churches behave as if John 3:16 says, “For God so loved correct doctrine that he sent His only-begotten Son that whosoever lines up squarely behind him on all the issues will not perish but have eternal life.” But the Bible teaches that God loves people; *issues* are secondary. In our zeal for the issues that matter, we should never treat the *people* who God loves as secondary to the issues. Jim Petersen reminds us, “We are not dealing merely with ideas and philosophies; we are dealing with people. Ideas find their existence only in people’s minds. In the zeal of our battle against ideas, we Christians often confuse matters by placing ourselves in a position of war against those who hold to those ideas. But we must always remember that we are sent to such people.”<sup>17</sup> As Joseph Stowell puts it, “. . . it seems that the church today is much more interested in ‘search and destroy’ than ‘seek and to save.’ We are prone to be too long on mad and too short on mercy.”<sup>18</sup> One seeker, who was reluctant to commit to Christ, was asked if he could see any reason why he should not become a Christian; his response was, “Yes; I don’t want to become a self-righteous, judgmental fundamentalist.”<sup>19</sup> The shame and guilt already experienced by the seeker may make the church seem condemning rather than convicting, stern and solemn rather than joyful, focused on the rules of passing generations at the expense of the needs of today’s generation.

A further difficulty caused by a judgmental, dogmatic environment is that it may discourage the seeker from expressing questions and doubts and seeking the answers that come from an honest pursuit of the truth. Jim Petersen speaks eloquently of the needs of the seeker when he says,

*When a nonChristian begins to study the Bible with you, one of his biggest unspoken questions will be, “To what degree will I be able to express what I really think with him? What will be the reaction if I express my true doubts and questions?” The person will first send out some rather “safe” trial questions. How we react to these questions will affect the level of communication between us from then on. If we respond with dogmatism (which is a form of insecurity) or with defensiveness (which is another form of insecurity), the nonChristian will quickly understand the rules of the game and will proceed accordingly. He will either operate within our limitations--or he will disappear. But if we demonstrate an attitude that encourages the expression of doubts and questions, our effectiveness will be far greater.<sup>20</sup>*

Lastly, and most sadly, there are some churches whose judgment on the world takes the form of secretly blaming the unchurched for not attending. Evangelistically ineffective church leaders will not always verbalize their resentment toward the unchurched but often, weary from continual failure, they adopt a take-it-or-leave-it attitude. Some church leaders give silent but deadly signals to the unchurched that whatever is being served up is a perfectly adequate meal if only the seeker would bother to come to the table. John Maxwell tells a story from the business world that illustrates such an attitude.

*A dog food company’s newest product was not selling well. The president called in his management staff. “How’s our advertising?” he asked. “Great,” replied the advertising executive. “This ad campaign will probably win the industry’s top awards this year.” “All right,” the president continued. “How about our product design?” The production manager spoke up. “It’s great, boss. Our new label and packaging scored high in every marketing test we ran.” “Hmmm. Well, how’s our sales staff? Are they doing their job?” The sales manager was quick to respond. “Oh, sure. Our people are the best in the business.” There was heavy silence as the president thought about what he’d just heard. “We’ve got great advertising, great packaging, a top-notch sales force, yet this product is coming in dead last in the dog food market. Does*

<sup>16</sup> Petersen, *Living Proof*, 57-58.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph M. Stowell, *Shepherding the Church Into the 21st Century* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 53.

<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, I pointed out that the best response to that irrational fear was to become a Christian and offer a better example of what a Christian really was; several months later he trusted Christ.

<sup>20</sup> Petersen, *Living Proof*, 188-189.

*anyone have any idea what the problem might be?" Everyone looked at each other. Finally, one brave soul spoke up. "It's those stupid dogs, sir. They just won't touch the stuff."<sup>21</sup>*

This type of judgement, prevalent among some of the critics of the seeker church movement, is a kind of cultural elitism—“we can't get the unchurched (read the great unwashed) to come to church because they have no appreciation for 18<sup>th</sup> century organ music.”

### **How a Seeker Service Overcomes Cultural Barriers**

Numerous examples could be shared from seeker church leaders around the country who have seen God use the seeker service to overcome the cultural resistance of the unchurched and prepare the way for a decision to follow Christ. Examples also abound at Cumberland Community Church and the following story illustrates the role of the seeker service as described in this chapter.

After the couple across the street from us moved in to their new home we began praying for them. For many months, we were like ships passing in the night. We invited them over for dinner, our schedules finally meshed and we were looking forward to getting to know them. Before they arrived, my wife and I prayed that the evening would fulfil God's purposes. Shortly into our conversation I asked how they were enjoying the Southern U.S. having just moved down from the north (even I can tell the cultural differences!). Unaware that we were Christians or that I was a pastor, the wife responded with several choice phrases about running into “bigoted fundamentalists” and “arrogant born-again types.” I asked what it was in particular she did not like about them and she told me. Her irritation was aimed at their beliefs and at their prevalence--living in the South she was now around more of them than before. Both she and her husband had childhood church experiences that had clearly left a very negative impression. Anything I said at that point would have only seemed defensive. Our conversation moved on to easier topics and we were all having a great evening. A little later, we discussed careers and I asked what they both did. Then her husband dropped the thousand-dollar question, “And what is it that you do?” I seized the moment, replying with a twinkle in my eye: “Oh, I am a pastor at one of those born-again churches that your wife was talking about earlier.” They profusely apologized and we all had a good laugh. I assured them both that I was not offended and that I had met a few “born-again” I did not particularly like either, but that most were not true to the stereotype. They assured us they wanted to visit our church and we all parted on good terms. Despite several invites over the following year they never came. We saw her one day and asked how she was doing. Terrible, it turned out. He had left her, they had started divorce proceedings, and now she was left to raise two small children. We stopped to chat with her whenever we saw her, often letting her know we were praying for her or offering practical help such as looking after her children. Then one day I took an invitation to her to come to a series at church on Toxic Religion (the contrast between legalism and genuine faith). She accepted and attended the following Sunday--and almost every Sunday for the next six months! She rarely let an opportunity to pass without saying what a surprise it was for her to be enjoying church. She was drawn to the friendliness and warmth of the people, the “slice of life” dramas and the medias, the relevance of the topics to her life—and, of course, the God who was drawing her to himself through all of this. Her enthusiasm to attend and her comfort in disagreeing with what we taught were evident in our conversations. But God was at work . . . at the end of an incredible Easter Sunday service she trusted Christ. She rushed up to me after the service to express profound thanks for our patience in sharing Christ with her. Many similar stories convince me that other seekers are out there, waiting to be loved into the Kingdom.

### **Conclusion**

Seeker church leaders are driven by a desire for the church to be an evangelistically effective expression of Biblical community empowered by the Spirit of God. They recognize that the traditional church has become more and more culturally irrelevant. This has come about, not so much because of styles or because the culture has rejected the church (although that can and does happen), but because the church appears to have built cultural barriers of *isolationism*, *inauthenticity*, *traditionalism*, *indifference*, and *judgmentalism*. This sub-Biblical culture alienates the unchurched and has led to the call for cultural relevance by the seeker church movement.

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<sup>21</sup> From the authors notes--source unknown.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CALL FOR CULTURAL RELEVANCE CLARIFIED

*“What obvious truth causes the saints to squirm? Simply this: the church exists for mission. The church lives by mission as fire exists by oxygen. The church does not exist for itself.”*

Bill Hull<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

One of the greatest renewals that seeker churches have brought about is the renewal of the priority of evangelism in the life of the church.<sup>2</sup> Gordon Macdonald, senior minister of Grace Chapel in Lexington, MA, and former president of InterVarsity, speaking in 1998 at a staff development day at Willow Creek said, “If someone were to ask me to reflect upon the greatest contributions coming out of Willow Creek, here’s the first thing I’d say: You are re-awakening the Christian community to the constant need to reach the lost . . . one of the great revolutions of the 20th and 21st centuries that none of us would have foreseen 25 years ago is the re-emergence of the church as the cutting edge winner of the lost.”<sup>3</sup>

Even those with cautionary advice to seeker churches commend them for attempting to restore the priority of mission. Os Guinness sees a series of commitments underlying churches like Willow Creek, “. . . to Christian renewal through renewal of the church, as opposed to politics or the culture; to renewal of the church through renewal of the local church, as opposed to the denomination or parachurch ministry; to the renewal of the local church through the renewal of mission, as opposed to other priorities . . .”<sup>4</sup>

Describing these evangelistically effective congregations as “apostolic congregations,” George Hunter notes, “. . . we are observing the emergence of entire congregations who are willing to be culturally flexible to reach people.”<sup>5</sup> These churches seek ways to minister that spring from a recognition of the importance of cultural relevance, an understanding of the unchurched and a desire to remove cultural barriers and build cultural bridges to the unchurched.

#### **What is Cultural Relevance?**

Cultural relevance is an attempt to present the timeless truth of the gospel in a manner that will relate to a particular culture. Commonly known in missiological circles as “contextualization,” it has been a fresh challenge for the church in every age and will continue to be so. John Stott describes it this way in his foreword to papers of the Lausanne consultation on gospel and culture:

*The problem facing every cross-cultural messenger of the Gospel can be simply stated. It is this: “How can I, who was born and brought up in one culture, take truth out of the Bible which was addressed to people in a second culture, and communicate it to people who belong to a third culture, without either falsifying the message or rendering it unintelligible?” . . . “Gospel and Culture” is not a topic of purely academic interest. On the contrary, it is the burning practical concern of every missionary, every preacher, every Christian witness. For it is literally*

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<sup>1</sup> Hull, *Disciple Making Pastor*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> While disagreeing with his theology, Robert Schuller’s dictum is a helpful one . . . “The church must die as a church to be re-born as a mission” (From the authors notes--source unknown).

<sup>3</sup> “Raising The Priority Of Evangelism,” *WCA News*, Vol. 6 No. 3 (May/June 1998): 16. See also the WCA study on seeker churches and their impact in “Impact Of A Movement,” *WCA News*, Vol. 5 No. 6 (November/December 1997), 1-9.

<sup>4</sup> Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 13. Guinness sees seeker churches as part of the church growth movement and thinks that there is also a commitment “most importantly, to the renewal of mission along one of two avenues—through charismatic renewal or through the employment of the behavioral sciences’ insights and tools to aid effective evangelism. In this final area . . . proponents use tools from the fields of management, marketing, psychology, and communications as they seek to ‘grow churches.’ Viewed in this broader way, the church-growth movement is a ‘back to basics’ movement with a special modern twist.” (p.13). As I will argue in Chapters 4 and 5, I don’t think this last commitment is a wise or necessary foundational commitment of the seeker church movement. David Wells speaks similarly (and derisively) of seeker church leaders as ‘church marketers’ but commends them again for putting the priority on the mission of the local church, “I applaud their desires to make the church hospitable to outsiders; that is to say, to make the church a place where the lost and forlorn of this world can find a welcome. I am much less enthusiastic about the way they implement this.” David F. Wells, ‘Marketing the Church: Analysis and Assessment, Part 2,’ *Faith and Mission* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 13.

<sup>5</sup> Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 58.

*impossible to evangelize in a cultural vacuum. Nobody can reduce the biblical Gospel to a few culture-free axioms which are universally intelligible. This is because the mind-set of all human beings has been formed by the culture in which they have been brought up.*<sup>6</sup>

Again, the importance of identifying with the culture of the people is seen in this statement from The Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture:

*Sensitive cross-cultural witnesses will not arrive at their sphere of service with a pre-packaged gospel. They must have a clear grasp of the "given" truth of the gospel. But they will fail to communicate successfully if they try to impose this on people without reference to their own cultural situation and that of the people to whom they go. It is only by active, loving engagement with the local people, thinking in their thought patterns, understanding their world-view, listening to their questions, and feeling their burdens, that the whole believing community (of which the missionary is a part) will be able to respond to their need. By common prayer, thought and heartsearching in dependence on the Holy Spirit, expatriate and local believers may learn together how to present Christ and contextualize the gospel with an equal degree of faithfulness and relevance. We are not claiming that it will be easy, although some Third World cultures have a natural affinity to biblical culture. But we believe that fresh creative understandings emerge when the Spirit-led believing community is listening and reacting sensitively to both the truth of Scripture and the needs of the world.*

*... there is the humility to begin our communication where people actually are and not where we would like them to be ... To begin where people are not is to share an irrelevant message; to stay where people are and never lead them on to the fullness of God's good news, is to share a truncated gospel.*<sup>7</sup>

In an article entitled 'Can The West Be Converted?' Lesslie Newbigin asks why we ignore the issue of cultural relevance when it comes to modern man in the West,

*... why is it that we have a plethora of missionary studies on the contextualization of the gospel in all the cultures of the world from China to Peru, but nothing comparable directed to the culture which we call "the modern world"?  
... a paganism born out of the rejection of Christianity, it is far tougher and more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganisms with which foreign missionaries have been in contact during the past 200 years. Here, without possibility of question, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.*<sup>8</sup>

David Olsson as editor of 'Defining a Movement: Ten Distinctive Values' has done the seeker church movement a great service in enlarging on ten values of the movement as understood by some of the staff at Willow Creek Community Church. Value #3 states, "We believe that the church should be culturally relevant while remaining doctrinally pure." In an expansion of that value, Olsson defines cultural relevance in this way:

*To be "culturally relevant" means to package and present that truth in the language of contemporary society. If biblical doctrine were a picture, traditional and contemporary formats would be among the choices of "frames" in which to display the truth. For churches unconcerned about reaching unchurched people, displaying truth in a contemporary frame is of little consequence. But for churches trying to reach irreligious people, the objective is to anticipate and minimize objections to attending a service, without compromising the gospel message. Music, facilities and use of the arts should all reflect the culture within which we live. For example, when leaders of Willow Creek designed their buildings and campus, they didn't visit other churches for inspiration; they visited the sites frequented by those they hoped to reach, like corporate offices, malls and civic centers.*<sup>9</sup>

The Biblical pattern for contextualization is seen in the ministry of Jesus and Paul. Even concerned critics like Greg Pritchard views Jesus teaching ministry as a Biblical example of cultural relevance:

*Relevance, understood from a biblical viewpoint, refers to the ability that Jesus had to communicate to people where they were. Jesus taught the truth to people where they lived His message was not a canned speech to be read to each new crowd that gathered. Rather we see in Jesus a flexibility that articulated a distinct word to each peculiar situation. When the scribes showed their lack of sincerity, Jesus responded by telling a parable that illustrated their hard hearts: "They knew he had spoken the parable against them" (Mark 12:12). To communicate relevantly, as I have defined it, means to understand the individuals one is addressing and communicate with them in a way that speaks to their unique situation.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture: The Papers of the Lausanne Consultation on Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), vii.

<sup>7</sup> "The Willowbank Report--Gospel and Culture." (Unpublished Papers presented at Conference at Willowbank, Somerset Bridge, Bermuda 6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> January, 1978), *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 2, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization*, 14,16.

<sup>8</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "Can The West Be Converted?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1987): 2,7.

<sup>9</sup> David L. Olsson, ed., "Defining a Movement: Ten Distinctive Values: Unpublished Paper of The Willow Creek Association" (1994): 3. See Appendix C for a summary of these ten values.

<sup>10</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 199.

Jesus neither isolated himself from “sinners” nor became so identified with them that he lost his uniqueness. He was the Son of God and Savior of the world and yet was heard gladly by irreligious people. The Willowbank Report suggests the incarnation as a model for cultural relevance in Christian witness describing it as, “. . . the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of mankind, since by His incarnation the Son became a first-century Galilean Jew.”<sup>11</sup> The Report also suggests that in Philippians 2:1-11 we see Jesus *renunciation* (the sacrifice of the rights, privileges, and powers he enjoyed as God’s Son) and *identification* (in service to those he came to reach). Jesus also intended that our mission be modelled on his—“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:21; cf. John 17:18 “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”). In the words of John Calvin, “as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus also spoke in the vernacular--as he shared the gospel he talked about money to tax collectors, used fishing analogies with fishermen, drew parallels between the kingdom and farming for farmers and did all this “with authority.” Jesus was also willing to go against the social and religious conventions of his day in order to share God’s love with sinners. His encounter with the woman at the well in John 4 is a powerful example of culturally relevant ministry. Jesus was willing to walk through Samaria, to talk to a Samaritan, to talk to a woman about spiritual matters, to talk with her in a public place knowing she was a habitual sinner, and was willing to share her “unclean” drinking utensil. The result—“many more became believers” (John 4:41)—speaks for itself. Paul said he was willing to adapt all negotiable elements of his ministry to the people he was trying to reach--to become a Jew, a Gentile, lawless or law-bound or even weak to win the Jew, the Gentile, the lawless, the law-bound or even the weak. He said he had “become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

In a chapter entitled “A Case For the Culturally Relevant Congregation,” George Hunter traces the culture barrier in the Christian church all the way from the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 where some in the early church thought others should “become like them” to be fully accepted as Christians. Just as the Judaizers expected new converts to be circumcised and obey other Jewish laws, so those spreading the Gospel have often expected their converts to submit to the cultural practices of the missionary. Hunter argues that a “cultural imperialism” has afflicted the churches of America today and calls for a fresh wave of “culturally indigenous churches” such as were encouraged after the Jerusalem Council. He offers “Theological Perspectives For Removing The Cultural Barrier” including the knowledge that our message is revealed, unchanging truth but the forms in which we communicate it can be adapted to our culture. He finally makes a strong case for seeker services or at least contemporary services as a culturally relevant tool.<sup>13</sup>

The seeker church movement believes strongly that the modern unchurched man or woman effectively lives in a different culture from the church member. The cultural barrier is so great between church member and unchurched that only an “active, loving engagement” with the unchurched will enable us to respond to their need. *Firstly*, this “active, loving engagement” requires an attempt to understand the unchurched--their beliefs, doubts, values, preferences, and pains. As Jim Petersen puts it, “We must, therefore, seek to understand the times, for the people we were sent to reach are caught up in them.”<sup>14</sup> *Secondly*, it requires that the church removes cultural barriers and builds cultural bridges to gain the greatest hearing from the unchurched, without compromising the truth of the gospel. Youth for Christ’s slogan sums up this balance, “Anchored to the Rock, Geared to the Times.”

## Understanding the Unchurched

Willow Creek, Saddleback Valley, and other seeker churches have conducted informal surveys among the unchurched that give further insight. Saddleback’s survey revealed four reasons why the unchurched thought their neighbors did not attend church: 1) sermons are boring 2) church members are unfriendly 3) the church is more interested in money than people and 4) quality childcare is not provided.<sup>15</sup> Willow Creek’s survey found that the number one reason people in their community did not attend church was because the church was always asking for money. The other reasons were: I am unable to relate to the music; I am unable to relate to the message; the church does not meet my needs; the services are predictable and boring; and the church makes me feel guilty (See Appendix A).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “The Willowbank Report,” 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 121 (I, XIII, 12). Richard Mouw says, ‘In one important sense the incarnation itself is a profound exercise in divine “tailoring.”’ Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 8. ~~{Mouw 1994: p3-9}~~

<sup>13</sup> Hunter, *Church For The Unchurched*, 55-80.

<sup>14</sup> Petersen, *Living Proof*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Unknown Author, “The Saddleback Strategy Yields Phenomenal Success,” *National and International Religion Report*, 28 (December 1992): 8.

<sup>16</sup> David L. Olsson, ed, *Willow Creek Community Church: Church Leader’s Handbook* (South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Community Church, 1991), 45.

Lee Strobel has done an excellent job of describing the unchurched from a practical viewpoint in his book *Inside The Mind of Unchurched Harry & Mary*.<sup>17</sup> George Hunter has further researched the unchurched and in his book *How to Reach Secular People* lists ten descriptives of secular people. He includes the ideas that they “have a negative image of the church” and cannot find “the door” to the church.<sup>18</sup>

1) *Secular people are essentially ignorant of basic Christianity.* 2) *Secular people are seeking life before death.* 3) *Secular people are conscious of doubt more than guilt.* 4) *Secular people have a negative image of the church.* 5) *Secular people have multiple alienations.* 6) *Secular people are untrusting.* 7) *Secular people have low self-esteem.* 8) *Secular people experience forces in history as “out of control.”* 9) *Secular people experience forces in personality as “out of control.”* 10) *Secular people cannot find “the door.”*

James Engel summarized the belief system and the presuppositions that commonly prevail among what he calls modern man:<sup>19</sup>

*God, if He exists at all, is just an impersonal moral force.*  
*Man basically has the capacity within himself to improve morally and make the right choices.*  
*Happiness consists of unlimited material acquisition.*  
*There really is no objective basis for right and wrong.*  
*The supernatural is just a figment of someone’s imagination.*  
*If a person lives a “good life,” then eternal destiny is assured.*  
*The Bible is nothing other than a book written by man.*

From personal observation of seekers during ten years of seeker church ministry I would add that the basic feelings, beliefs and lifestyle of secular Americans which combine to form a cultural barrier to the gospel include the following:

1) *They have a negative view of the gospel and its proponents; its irrelevance, its negative message, its exclusivism in a culture that values tolerance above all things (and yet only tolerates fellow pluralists), its boring expression in the church services they have attended and its unfamiliar feel (the strange language, out-dated music, and antiquated surroundings).*  
2) *They have a decreasing awareness of any religious heritage, tradition and customs.*  
3) *They know less of a sense of community and authentic relationships and yet have a greater desire for them.*  
4) *They have increased mobility and greater alternatives than spending Sunday mornings at church. These alternatives are offered at home (TV, videos, computers) and in the community (recreation and leisure, shopping, etc.)*  
5) *They are influenced by secularism and secularization and now feel like they live in a different culture than the church-attender.*  
6) *They are influenced by modernism and post-modern thinking resulting in a denial of both revelation (modernism) and reason (postmodernism) and a less ready soil in which to plant the gospel seed.*  
7) *They are infected with three primary cultural values that challenge evangelism and missions: pragmatism, optimism, and individualism.*<sup>20</sup>

When unchurched people finally visit a church, these issues distill into several “cultural barriers” that prevent them from hearing the gospel. These barriers include:

1) The “care” barrier--do believers seem like they really care about other people (even ones unlike them) or are they preoccupied with their own religious agenda; does God, as we portray him, care more about issues or people? In order to overcome this barrier we must be willing to address the anxieties and misperceptions of the unbeliever. Is a visit to church for an unbeliever a “caring” experience?

2) The “cringe” barrier--are there experiences that the unchurched observe or are expected to participate in that cause them to be embarrassed? This relates to facilities, the leaders, the programs, and the people. Additionally do we cause the

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<sup>17</sup> Lee Strobel, *Inside The Mind of Unchurched Harry & Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 45-79. Despite the lack of a Biblical description of the seeker (see Chapter 6 of this thesis for a discussion on this issue), Lee’s 15 Observations about Harry are very helpful: #1 Harry has rejected church, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he has rejected God. #2 Harry is morally adrift, but he secretly wants an anchor. #3 Harry resists rules but responds to reasons. #4 Harry doesn’t understand Christianity, but he’s also ignorant about what he claims to believe in. #5 Harry has legitimate questions about spiritual matters, but he doesn’t expect answers from Christians. #6 Harry doesn’t just ask, “Is Christianity true?” Often he’s asking: “Does Christianity work?” #7 Harry doesn’t just want to know something; he wants to experience it. #8 Harry doesn’t want to be somebody’s project, but he would like to be somebody’s friend. #9 Harry may distrust authority but he’s receptive to authentic Biblical leadership. #10 Harry is no longer loyal to denominations, but he is attracted to places where his needs will be met. #11 Harry isn’t much of a joiner, but he’s hungry for a cause he can connect with. #12 Even if Harry is not spiritually sensitive, he wants his children to get quality moral training. #13 Harry and Mary are confused about sex roles, but they don’t know that the Bible can clarify for them what it means to be a man and a woman. #14 Harry is proud that he’s tolerant of different faiths, but he thinks Christians are narrow-minded. #15 There’s a good chance Harry would try church if a friend invited him--but this may actually do him more harm than good.

<sup>18</sup> Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People*, 44-54.

<sup>19</sup> James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 75; cited in Petersen, *Living Proof*, 198.

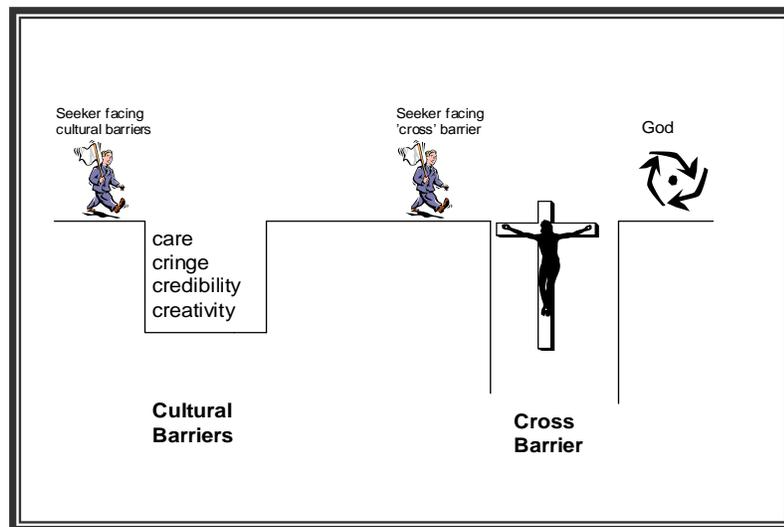
<sup>20</sup> This last point comes from William A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), ch.2.

unbeliever to cringe by expectations that they will participate as fully devoted followers of Christ? Some would say that when a seeker visits a church he will probably not enjoy being expected to give anything, sign anything, sing anything or say anything. On both counts, is a visit to church a “safe” experience?

3) The “credibility” barrier—do unbelievers hear, see, or experience anything that prevents them from responding to the gospel? Do the observable attitudes and actions of the leaders and participants in the service create or destroy credibility. Does the pastor have credibility in his teaching; is there authenticity in the way people relate to each other and in the way the pastor speaks, the vocalists sing, etc. The unchurched person has greater expectations of the services a church provides including everything from child-care to facilities to interesting services. In a culture with a customer-service orientation, the church can unintentionally seem uninterested in and undeserving of the time and loyalty of an outsider. Is a visit to church for an unbeliever an “excellent” experience?

4) The “creativity” barrier—do unbelievers hear, see, or experience anything that causes them to listen to the gospel? Or is the church caught in a time warp, serving up boring services in an entertainment-saturated culture? Does the church use drama, media, contemporary music, and other forms of communication to which the unchurched person can relate. Is a visit to church a “captivating” experience?

It is wise to recognize these barriers as genuine roadblocks for the seeker on his or her journey to faith in Christ. Seekers need help over the cultural barrier so that they can get to the “cross” barrier and hear the clear message of the gospel. *Figure 1* illustrates this process.



*Figure 1. The Cultural and Cross Barriers*

### ***An Encounter with the Oddfellows Society***

Until church leaders begin to see the Christian sub-culture through the eyes of outsiders (which is what the seeker-oriented churches are asking us to do) they will not understand the need for cultural relevance. At conversion many believers are able to do this but they begin to be affected by the isolationism, judgmentalism, traditionalism and indifference of the church, losing much in their ability to relate to their lost friends and neighbors. Years of seeker ministry convince me that while not all faults are those of the church, we must take the seekers’ *perception* seriously if we are to gain a hearing.

The following illustration demonstrates the anxiety that can accompany many unbelievers in attending a church. Several years ago, our church took our band and drama team on a tour of churches in the U.K. to encourage them in reaching the unchurched. We did Sunday seeker services and held training days for the leadership and program teams. I was teaching one Saturday morning at a traditional church and asked the seminar participants to imagine what it would be like coming to church for the first time. I looked out the window and there, not 20 yards across the road from the church, was a sign above the door of a clubhouse announcing “The Oddfellows Society.” I quickly asked how many in the seminar had attended any events at the Oddfellows Society. Not a single hand went up. I then asked who knew what the Oddfellows Society was. Again no responses. Therefore, I asked them to imagine that a helpful, friendly neighbor whom they had come to know and trust had invited them and they were now committed to attending the next weekly meeting of

the Oddfellows Society. We took suggestions from around the room as to what we might think, feel and do in the week leading up to our visit and what questions we would want answered. The discussion flowed freely.

**Question:** What would you feel about going to the event?

**Responses:** 'I would try to get out of it', 'I might feel set up if I thought their 'helpful, friendliness' was faked', 'I would feel anxious about fitting in.'

**Question:** What might you feel about the group themselves?

**Responses:** Why did they call themselves such a funny name? What did they practice?

**Question:** What would be your concerns about the event itself?

**Responses:** What should I wear? What kind of ceremony will they be having and will I have to participate? Do they have Oddfellow clothes and will I stand out? Is this the same group with the funny hats that collect money for hospitals? Will they pressure me to sign up and join them? Will one of the neighbors see me there and think I've become one of them? Will they get me to sign something and end up on a mailing list--or worse start visiting my door (are their Jehovah's Oddfellows?). What if they sing Oddfellow songs and I don't know the words?

All of these are thoughts, feelings and experiences the unchurched may have about coming to "First Baptist" or "Second Presbyterian Church." Agreed, the average unchurched person may not be so uninformed about church but many who are have similar anxieties. If we can remove unnecessary cultural barriers for them without deviating from the purposes of the church, without distorting the message of the gospel, without being slick or fake and without overlooking the genuine needs of the believer, the unchurched may be more disposed to return. And the believer who might bring them will enjoy it more too.

One more observation. Perhaps the greatest disincentive to investing any time at all in turning up at any Oddfellow events would be the sneaking suspicion that once you remove all the ceremony, the institutional rules, the social rituals and the shared experiences, once you get to the very heart of all their practices and beliefs, there is nothing there. It is all built around social convention and agreement to rituals for the sake of having something to believe in. And that is exactly what many seekers say is at the heart of church--I used to think that myself. It is when a seeker turns up at church and slowly becomes aware that Christians actually believe that God exists that the real issue begins to be addressed. When they see us talking to him, listening to him, worshipping him, they realize they may not believe in him--but we most certainly do. They begin to discover that the heart of Christianity is a relationship with the Living God.<sup>21</sup>

## Removing Cultural Barriers and Building Cultural Bridges

While evangelistically ineffective churches tolerate the barriers of *isolationism*, *inauthenticity*, *traditionalism*, *indifference*, and *judgmentalism*, discussed in chapter one, seeker churches work actively to remove such barriers. Instead, they offer the seeker a *caring* experience, an *authentic* experience, a *relevant* experience, an *excellent* experience, and a *safe* experience.<sup>22</sup>

### *A Caring Experience--vs.--Isolationism*

At the heart of the desire to offer the seeker a caring experience is a God-given love for people. Jesus himself summarized the law and prophets this way, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39 NIV). To love our seeking neighbors means building caring relationships with them, earning the right to share with them, and bringing them to a time and place where they hear about and, hopefully, respond to Christ. The believer must avoid the extremes of *isolation* and *imitation* by pursuing *infiltration*--the penetration of the world of friends and neighbors with the love of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Too many believers seem to misuse the Biblical idea of holiness (separation from evil) to isolate themselves from the very people they are commanded to reach; busyness in church activities crowds out caring. In contrast, seeker churches teach that a caring attitude and acts of kindness are the starting place for a verbal witness about a relationship with Christ followed by an invitation to a seeker service or seeker event. The goal here is not just an

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<sup>21</sup> The reader may be wondering what the Oddfellows Society actually is. Despite using the illustration at many churches no one has ever offered an explanation. Then I spoke at a church near London. An elderly man jumped up enthusiastically and enlightened the congregation. Back in the days when trade unions and not the State provided support for the basic needs of their members, such as health insurance and unemployment benefits, most trades had their own union. But the Methodist church noticed that many trades had too few members to form a cooperative society. So the church, as an expression of an active Christian social conscience, started a society for all the odd trades not represented by the main unions--the Oddfellows Society! Despite an obscure history and a name out of step with times this organization had a noble beginning, met a variety of human needs and developed branches all over the U.K and U.S.A. God forbid that the church should allow itself to be relegated to such an insignificant place in society. And yet that is what the church in Europe faces because it has clung to its traditions at the expense of the generation it should be reaching.

<sup>22</sup> The acrostic 'C.A.R.E.S.' is a helpful reminder of these issues. Lee Strobel discusses similar concepts in *Inside The Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* in chapters entitled 'Gimme Some Space', 'Gimme Creativity', 'Gimme Something Good', 'Gimme Something From The Heart', 'Gimme Something I Can Relate To'.

<sup>23</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 236. Warren refers to Jesus as having a "sinner-sensitive" ministry (p.237).

invitation to a service or the information of the gospel being shared—it is caring that the person comes to know Christ. Seekers do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Much of this caring takes place outside of formal church services; but a caring attitude will inevitably follow through to the way services are planned and conducted in order to minimize the anxieties and concerns of the seeker. Seeker church leaders are willing to do this and to change the exclusive focus of church services from believers to believers and seekers. This, after all, is the one time of the week when seekers might be most influenced by seeing and hearing an expression of the life and love of God in the people of God at church.

The first step toward providing the seeker a caring experience is to foster an atmosphere of grace and acceptance and facilities that make it easier to come. This can be done through everything from well-placed signs, to friendly greeters, to a friendly welcome from those leading the service, to the way the offering is handled.<sup>24</sup> Everything must be considered from the point of view of the visitor who does not know his way around the building or the Bible. Rick Warren makes many helpful suggestions about the program, including the following:

*... A printed order of service says, "there are no surprises here". . . Describe the service in non-technical terms. . . (not) invocation, offertory anthem, invitational hymn, benediction, and postlude. To an unbeliever, you might as well be talking pig latin . . . Include explanatory notes . . . Minimize internal church announcements . . . Train your members to read the bulletin . . . Announce only events that apply to everyone . . . Avoid appeals for help from the pulpit . . . Do not conduct internal church business during a seeker service . . .*<sup>25</sup>

The second area where the seeker can be offered a caring experience is in the content of the program and in particular the teaching of the pastor. Rick Warren makes the point:

*There is no standard way to design a seeker service. There are only three nonnegotiable elements of a seeker service: (1) treat unbelievers with love and respect, (2) relate the service to their needs, and (3) share the message in a practical, understandable manner. All other elements are secondary issues that churches shouldn't get hung up on. . . . New approaches and technologies are only tools. You don't have to use drama and multimedia or have a nice building and convenient parking to reach unbelievers.*<sup>26</sup>

Warren goes on to explain that Jesus attracted crowds by loving unbelievers, meeting their needs and teaching them in interesting and practical ways.<sup>27</sup> Those who were closest to Jesus during his ministry were left with the lasting impression that he was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14,17). Warren observes wittily that some pastors of large churches give the impression that they love audiences but do not like people.<sup>28</sup> Every pastor needs to ask, "Do I love people the way Jesus did or do I just love preaching?"

Whenever a church moves to provide an atmosphere of grace for seekers it will make mistakes and be criticized by some for compromising its message of truth. Jesus felt the tension between loving the sinner without condoning the sin, often was often accused of failing to separate himself sufficiently from sinners. However, too often churches use the standards of conduct expected of a believer and misapply them to the visiting seeker. "Railing against unrighteousness" will keep the affection of self-satisfied church members but will do little to convince the unbeliever to investigate the claims of Christ. Providing a caring experience with an atmosphere of grace and acceptance does not imply approval of immoral lifestyles. The seeker church that draws in the outsider needs to be diligent in teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the full ministry of the word of God is evidenced in the life of the church (2 Timothy 3:16). This leads to the second requirement for a seeker church--the commitment to offer the seeker an authentic experience.

### ***An Authentic Experience--vs.--Inauthenticity***

The greatest role in opening the eyes of seekers to the truth is to let the gospel speak in all its power. An authentic church will not minimize or decentralize the gospel nor will it seek to hide the source of its message or its power. To be authentic is to be who we are. No attempt at removing cultural barriers and building cultural bridges will make half as

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<sup>24</sup> Most seeker churches emphasize when taking up the offering, that it is primarily an opportunity for members and regular attenders to give; this unexpected surprise for the visitor (especially when they hold the belief "the church is always after my money") is all part of what it means to create an atmosphere of grace and acceptance.

<sup>25</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 273-275. Among many suggestions Warren makes are: "Offer multiple service times . . . Offer surplus parking . . . Offer children's Sunday School simultaneously with the service . . . Put a map to your church on all advertising . . . Reserve the best parking spots for visitors . . . Place directional signs everywhere . . . Have taped music playing when people enter your buildings, music relaxes people (silence is scary to unchurched visitors . . . There is a place for silence in worship, but it's not at the beginning of a seeker service) . . . Allow visitors to remain anonymous in the service . . . Offer a public welcome that relaxes people . . . Create an attractive atmosphere . . . Celebrate--too many church services resemble a funeral more than a festival . . ." (pp. 251-277).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 246-248.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 208ff.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

much impact as allowing the church to be the church and the gospel to be given a hearing. Willow Creek's evangelism ministry makes authenticity the first in a list of Transferable Principles.<sup>29</sup>

However, the church must avoid the pretense that often puts off the seeker. It must recognize what George Hunter refers to as the "stained-glass barrier."<sup>30</sup> Too much focus on "dressing up," too much ceremony, too much formality, etc. can contribute to the true church and its message being obscured. People tend to feel more anxious in a formal setting; anxiety rises because of the formality and the greater risk of wearing, doing or saying the wrong thing. That is one reason why most seeker churches encourage informal dress--the atmosphere is then relaxing and the focus clearly put on the reason why people are gathered and what they are hearing.

Seeker churches also believe that application of truth and the emphasis on a vital relationship with God takes precedence over the mere knowledge of Biblical content. Many years ago A. W. Tozer addressed this tendency toward "evangelical rationalism":

*There is today an evangelical rationalism which says that the truth is in the Word and if you want to know truth, go learn the Word. If you get the Word, you have the truth. That is the evangelical rationalism that we have in fundamentalist circles: "If you learn the text you've got the truth." This evangelical rationalist wears our uniform. He comes in wearing our uniform and says what the Pharisees . . . said: "Well, truth is truth and if you believe the truth you've got it." Such see no beyond and no mystic depth, no mysterious or divine. They see only, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord." They have the text and the code and the creed, and to them that is the truth. So they pass it on to others. The result is we are dying spiritually. To know the Truth, we must "know" the Son.<sup>31</sup>*

The authentic experience that the seeker hungers for is to hear Biblical truth that is more about life change than ancient doctrine. David Olsson puts it this way, "When we speak of 'anointed' biblical teaching, we refer to teaching that goes beyond information to transformation. It is teaching that is empowered and led by the Holy Spirit from preparation to presentation. It goes beyond simple biblical accuracy to a relevant application of truth--impacting those who listen and respond."<sup>32</sup>

A word of caution is in order here that will be explicitly addressed in later chapters. "Trying to be authentic" is an oxymoron at best and deception at worst. It is too easy for those wanting to relate to seekers to work so hard on presenting what they imagine seekers need that they no longer communicate who they are but who they think they ought to be. Too much program tweaking and platform fixation can replace reality with irrelevance and rob the gospel of its power.

### ***A Relevant, Creative Experience--vs.--Traditionalism***

In a chapter entitled, "Bridging The Distance From Indifference to Faith," Jim Petersen compares the interest of the unchurched in religion to the interest of airline travelers in the pre-flight safety instructions:

*The world's least attentive audience would probably be found on the Friday afternoon flights between La Guardia Airport in New York and National Airport in Washington, D.C. These flights are always full of businessmen, many of whom make that same trip a hundred times a year. Invariably, before takeoff the stewardess comes on with the routine safety instructions. As she goes through her explanation, the inattention is absolute. She is endured and everyone is relieved when she has finally finished.*

*She fails to hold the attention of her audience for two reasons. In the first place, nothing she says is news (my emphasis). Everyone aboard has already been through it countless times. In the second place, the dangers for which she is preparing the passengers are very remote (my emphasis). The felt need for what she has to say is just about zero. What would it take for her to capture the attention of her passengers so that they would actually listen and finally learn how to use one of those oxygen masks? Suppose the plane developed serious mechanical problems at 20,000 feet and began to lose altitude. If that same stewardess would then repeat those same instructions to those same passengers under those emergency conditions, she would have everyone's total attention! People are motivated to learn to the degree that the subject matter is perceived as relevant to needs or wants.*

*The secularized person has quit listening to the voices of religion for similar reasons. He has concluded that no news (new information) will ever be forthcoming. The Christian claims and warnings appear hopelessly redundant. If we are to recapture his attention, we must begin at the level of his felt needs and aspirations.<sup>33</sup>*

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix F: #1. The message of Christ should flow out of a life fully given to Christ. Spiritual seekers are drawn to spiritual authenticity.

<sup>30</sup> George Hunter, "How To Reach Secular People," *Good News* (Nov-Dec 1992): 10-12. Hunter also addresses the image barrier, the gospel barrier and the total commitment barrier.

<sup>31</sup> A. W. Tozer, "Power for Living," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 13, Oct. 16, 1977.

<sup>32</sup> Olsson, "Defining a Movement," 1.

<sup>33</sup> Petersen, *Living Proof*, 153-154.

Seeker churches attempt to offer a creative, relevant experience to the unchurched. Behind the need to offer this experience lies two assumptions made by the unchurched: Christianity is not *relevant* to my life, Christianity is not *reliable*—that is it is not true and it does not “work.” If an unchurched person thought Christianity was relevant, true, and “worked” they would probably be Christians already. Jim Petersen asks, “What do you think it would take to awaken your interest in the Christian message, to induce you to go back and examine it, having already discarded it as an unimportant relic? What would it take for a ray of hope to penetrate layers of disenchantment?”<sup>34</sup>

Many of the unchurched have written off what churches believe and teach as “the same old stuff”—not only boring but irrelevant.<sup>35</sup> Sadly, many who lead the services are responsible for this impression—they seem to believe it themselves. A major part of the ministry of seeker churches is to get the seeker to take a fresh look at old truths. Even concerned critics of the seeker church movement are asking the same questions. Douglas Webster asks: “How do we present Christ to a consumer-oriented, sex-crazed, self-preoccupied, success-focused, technologically sophisticated, light-hearted, entertainment-centered culture?”<sup>36</sup> Douglas Groothuis reminds us that cultural relevance means more than impressing the seeker; “We must *engage* the culture biblically by renegotiating its assumptions and calling into question its false gospels, false securities, and false loyalties.”<sup>37</sup> As with others in the seeker movement, Willow Creek sees its mandate for cultural relevance coming from Jesus and Paul. Just as they presented truth using the analogies of first century Palestine so we need to use current events and familiar analogies:

*Seeker-targeted programming strategies are simply an application of Jesus’ methods to the church of our generation. Where He told stories, we elaborate with drama. Where He illustrated truth with easily recognized objects and the common knowledge of His day, so we capitalize on current events and concerns. Where He communicated to large crowds from a boat across the water or from a mountainside across a plateau, so we employ current technology to enhance our communication of the Gospel*

*Jesus was a master of presenting truth in the language of His day. When trying to describe the Kingdom of God, Jesus suggested a mustard seed, which in that day was known as the smallest of seeds, yet grew to be the largest of garden plants. He used current events to make his points, once referring to 18 people killed by a collapsed tower when asked about degrees of sinfulness (Luke 13:4). He used fig trees, coins, sheep and situational parables (like the persistent widow, prodigal son and shrewd manager) to communicate truth to his audience in language with which they were familiar.<sup>38</sup>*

Again, Jim White makes the same point:

*When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well, He talked of water; when He dialogued with fisherman, He talked of fishing; when He conversed with tax collectors, He spoke of money. The apostle Paul, when He confronted with Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, responded in like manner with a conversation rooted in Greek philosophy. His driving passion was to become all things to all men in order that he might save some.<sup>39</sup>*

Many unchurched people also believe that Christianity is unreliable—it is not true and does not work. Reinforcement may come from the few poor examples they have experienced in their own family or social circle or seen in the media. Bill Hybels emphasizes that a seeker takes a step toward Christ when discovering that Christianity “works”: “. . . those outside the faith grossly underestimate the day-to-day benefits of knowing and honoring God. . . . as people find out that Christian teachings *work*, they’ll stay around long enough to discover that Christian claims are *true*.”<sup>40</sup>

Unchurched people often assume Christianity to be untrue and inconsistent with reason. Answering tough questions must therefore take precedence over offering shallow platitudes. One seeker church in Michigan makes a question and answer time with the pastor a regular feature of their seeker service.<sup>41</sup> At Cumberland Community Church, we did a series entitled “God, I Have a Question,” dealing with the doubts of seekers. Each message was followed by an open floor question and answer time. The sentiment of several seekers who came to Christ was that the format allowed them to hear reasonable answers to hard questions.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, the Willow Creek Survey in Appendix A. A common complaint was “the services are predictable and boring.”

<sup>36</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Mittelberg and Douglas Groothuis, “Pro and Con: The Seeker Church Movement: Seeker-Sensitive for the Sake of the Gospel: Arguing with Success,” *Christian Research Journal* (Spring 1996): 54.

<sup>38</sup> Olsson, “Defining a Movement,” 3.

<sup>39</sup> White, “Defining the Seeker-Targeted Approach,” 3.

<sup>40</sup> Hybels and Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, 209.

<sup>41</sup> Calvary Baptist Church in Grand Rapids Michigan; see Ed Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service: How Traditional Churches Can Reach the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

### ***An Excellent Experience--vs.--Indifference***

From the first occasion an unbeliever begins to attend services, barriers of indifference have to be avoided and bridges of excellence built. Many seekers have the idea that religious people are out of touch. They come to church and are influenced by what they experience--as the old adage says "first impressions are lasting impressions." If a visitor walks into an environment that communicates indifference to them, why should they return? Willow Creek, for example, sees this principle guiding the facility, the music, the content of the seeker service, the media used to communicate--everything that the seeker sees, hears and experiences on a visit to church:

*We believe that excellence honors God and inspires people . . . Excellence also serves the mission of turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Unchurched men and women in the marketplace are accustomed to high standards in their work environment. Excellence in the church also communicates high standards, along with a strong sense of belief, purpose, and dedication. That draws attention and arouses curiosity. But in poor contrast to familiar cultural standards are some churches that are often indifferent, doing only what it takes to get by and paying minimal attention to detail. By embracing a biblically mandated and culturally informed value of excellence, the church removes yet one more unnecessary obstacle that can stand between it and unbelievers.<sup>42</sup>*

Every day we see the same principles at work. If we have guests from Scotland in our home we want to serve them. We plan ahead, prepare the guest room, lay out extra towels and toiletries, prepare meals that they like (or explain the American food we have cooked!), and offer to show them around town. In short, we plan everything with our guests in mind. If when they arrived, we simply went about our business as usual they would not feel welcomed nor would they be relaxed in a culture with which they are not yet familiar. When they have stayed with us long enough to be acclimatized to US culture and have become like family, we do not need to be as concerned. Tragically, in most churches, other than a "fleeting greeting" from the front, guests are ignored. Most churches are set up to cater exclusively to church family and it is by chance that outsiders are converted; they consequently expect visitors and guests to behave like family from the minute they walk in the door.

Some barriers that churches need to address are not primarily cultural ones but need to be addressed nevertheless: insufficient parking, inadequate signs and directions, worn decor, etc. Enough of these barriers combined could form a "culture" of indifference and poor quality. If the seeker is accustomed to excellence and quality when he visits the supermarket, the mall and the corporate campus then visiting a rundown, inadequate church facility could result in less respect for the message of the church. Attention also needs to be given to lighting and sound (can everyone see and hear the program without distractions especially any media). Is there adequate, convenient and comfortable seating? Is the temperature comfortable? Are there plants and decor to brighten up the environment? Are symbols and imagery easily understandable by an unchurched guest?<sup>43</sup>

### ***A Safe Experience--vs.--Judgmentalism***

In particular, anything that can be done to give the visitor a "safe" experience will increase the likelihood of his coming back. The relational dimension of making a guest feel welcome and relaxed is especially important. Rick Warren describes the typical church approach succinctly, "In America, the most common fear people have is going to a party where they will be surrounded by strangers. The second most common fear is having to speak before a crowd, and the third most common fear is being asked a personal question in public. The way many churches welcome visitors causes them to experience their three greatest fears all at once!"<sup>44</sup>

Some churches such as Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Valley Community Church argue for anonymity of the seeker. They would say that the seeker wants to remain anonymous and must not be asked to sing, sign or say anything. At Cumberland Community Church, we have found that safety is a higher priority, of which anonymity *may* be part; it may be a large or small part depending on, among other things, the individual seeker, the exposure to previous religious experience, and the size of the church. For some churches, particularly smaller ones, or churches in a more churched culture, the attempt at allowing anonymity results in a cold, unfriendliness toward outsiders. Safety means the seeker does not feel like he will be expected to say, sign or sing anything unless he wants to, thus while anonymity is

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<sup>42</sup> Olsson, "Defining a Movement," 8.

<sup>43</sup> Rick Warren asks, "Are the nurseries clean and safe? Are the restrooms clean? Visitors may forget the sermon, but the memory of a fowl-smelling restroom lingers on . . . and on . . . and on!" Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 268-269.

<sup>44</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 260.

permitted, invitations to participate are offered.<sup>45</sup> Seeker churches insist that they provide a safe environment for one main reason—to gain a better hearing for the gospel. It is what Bill Hybels calls “a safe environment for a dangerous message.”

Providing a safe experience will also mean avoiding the judgmentalism that puts off many seekers from finding Christ. The effect of the removal of this cultural barrier and the building of cultural bridges is illustrated in a letter that a woman named Maggie sent to Lee Strobel when she was a spiritual seeker and started coming to Willow Creek. She wrote:

*The Christianity I grew up with was so confusing to me even as a child. People said one thing but did another. They appeared very spiritual in public but were abusive in private. What they said and what they did never fit. There was such a discrepancy. I came to hate Christianity and did not want to be associated with a church. So when I came to Willow Creek and to my small group, I needed gentleness. I needed to be able to ask any question. I needed to have my questions taken seriously. I needed to be treated with respect and validated. Most of all I needed to see people whose actions match what they say. I am not looking for perfect but I am looking for real. Integrity is the word that comes to mind. I need to hear real people talk about real life and I need to know if God is—or can be—a part of real life. Does He care about the wounds I have? Does He care I need a place to live? Can I ever be a whole, healthy person? I have asked questions like these. And I have not been laughed at or ignored or invalidated. I have not been pushed or pressured in any way. . . I don't understand the caring I've received. I don't understand that the leaders don't seem afraid of questions. They don't say things like, “You just have to have faith” or “You need to pray more.” They don't seem to be afraid to tell who they are. They seem genuine.<sup>46</sup>*

This young woman ended her letter with a poem that she wrote. It is the sentiments of a spiritual seeker toward those of us who are Christians.

*Do you know do you understand that you represent Jesus to me?  
Do you know do you understand that when you treat me with gentleness, it raises the question in my mind that maybe He is gentle, too.  
Maybe He isn't someone who laughs when I am hurt.  
Do you know do you understand that when you listen to my questions and you don't laugh, I think, “What if Jesus is interested in me, too?”  
Do you know do you understand that when I hear you talk about arguments and conflict and scars from your past that I think, “Maybe I am just a regular person instead of a bad, no good little girl who deserves abuse.”  
If you care, I think maybe He cares--and then there's this flame of hope that burns inside of me and for a while I am afraid to breathe because it might go out.  
Do you know do you understand that your words are His words? Your face, His face to someone like me?  
Please be who you say you are. Please, God, don't let this be another trick. Please let this be real. Please.  
Do you know do you understand that you represent Jesus to me?<sup>47</sup>*

## Conclusion

Many churches have found that a step toward evangelistic effectiveness is being culturally relevant. This necessitates an understanding of the unchurched and a willingness to remove cultural barriers and build cultural bridges. When believers make the effort to do this, they can impact a greater number of seekers who will find Christ.

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## CHAPTER 3

### THE CALL FOR BIBLICAL PURITY CLARIFIED

*Without maintaining critical tension, the principle of identification is a recipe for compromise and capitulation. It is no accident that the charge of being ‘all things to all people’ has become a popular synonym for compromise. Os Guinness<sup>48</sup>*

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<sup>45</sup> This may be a result of ministering in a more ‘churched’ culture in the Bible belt of the Southern U.S.; it was particularly noticeable in the early days when Buckhead Community Church was a church in its infancy. Prioritizing the value of anonymity while ensuring an authentic welcome to all is a tough act. Similarly, we have found as many seekers expressing a desire to sing as have avoided it; in Scotland, even an unchurched person would expect to sing if he visits a church. More of this in Chapter 3.

<sup>46</sup> Personal letter from Maggie to Lee Strobel; shared with permission.

<sup>47</sup> Lee told me he later called Maggie for permission to read her poem to the people of Willow Creek. She had become a Christian. When he asked her why—was it a question that was answered or a fact she learned—she said, no. It was the people; she met people at the church who were Jesus to her.

<sup>48</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 28.

## Introduction

David Olsson clarifies doctrinal purity in the W.C.A. position paper, *Defining a Movement: Ten Distinctive Values*: “When it comes to communicating the gospel, ‘remaining doctrinally pure’ means that a church does not ignore, massage, manipulate or otherwise distort the fundamental truths revealed in the Bible, but instead displays an unflinching adherence to and unapologetic proclamation of biblical truth.”<sup>49</sup> The statement from Willow Creek emphasizes “doctrinal purity.” This thesis emphasizes “biblical purity” which includes doctrinal purity but also the much larger idea that the church ought to operate with a commitment to biblical principle, practice and function where it is prescribed. Indeed, the concerns and criticisms leveled at seeker churches pertain to this issue--that they have failed to realize the unintended compromises of Biblical purity that are inherent in their model of ministry.

## Concerns About Cultural Relevance

Part of the controversy arises because different critics define cultural relevance in different ways and thus take issue with varying definitions of relevance. Some view relevance as necessarily involving meeting the felt needs of the seeker, changing the message accordingly, and building the church around the seeker. However, the main proponents of seeker ministry do not share this view.

John MacArthur, a prominent critic of the seeker church movement, speaks for many in taking the view that *any* attempt at cultural relevance is a de facto equivalent to a compromise of Biblical purity. Speaking of Willow Creek he says:

*The quest for relevance has led this church and others like it to kick aside virtually every conventional expression of worship. Sunday services are first-class musical-comedy-drama productions-no Bible teaching or expository preaching. The offertory is more likely to be the theme from Rocky than music with a spiritual message. Everything possible is done to cater to the appetites of the unchurched. Nothing is permitted that would challenge them or make them uncomfortable. The approach has proved so successful in drawing crowds that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of churches nationwide have now adopted the same philosophy.*<sup>50</sup>

MacArthur leans heavily on the ministry and writings of Martin Lloyd-Jones who dismissed the need for cultural relevance in the 1960's.<sup>51</sup> However, to say that *any* attempt at cultural relevance is wrong is contrary to Biblical evidence, as has already been seen in chapter two. In fact, even John MacArthur acknowledges the need to accommodate the seeker in an interview with *Leadership*. The interviewer asked a series of questions about whether MacArthur advertised in the Yellow Pages, provided a warm welcome for visitors, aimed for excellence in his facility, convenient parking, addressed the needs of his hearers, and used relevant illustrations. The answers to all of these questions were positive, which then brought the observation that this sounded a lot like a user-friendly church. MacArthur's reply reveals his real concern: “I have no problem with anything that doesn't compromise the message or depreciate worship. What happens when you're so concerned about unbelievers' reactions, though, is you depreciate worship. You put God-centeredness somewhere down the line. There is nothing wrong with being creative, doing things that make outsiders take a look at your church, things that attract needy unbelievers, as long as it doesn't mitigate the message that God is central.”<sup>52</sup> The real objection to cultural relevance is that it compromises worship and the centrality of God. Elsewhere, MacArthur appeals to the Reformers “regulative principle”—that the church be regulated only by what was specifically approved in Scripture.<sup>53</sup> This principle would also explain David Wells objections to the use of drama.<sup>54</sup>

Others dismiss the need for cultural relevance on the basis that the church is partly defined by its cultural irrelevance. The reason for the differences between church and world are that the culture is out of step, not the church. The Bible

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<sup>49</sup> Olsson, “Defining a Movement,” 3; for the rest of this statement see Appendix E.

<sup>50</sup> John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 148.

<sup>51</sup> In response to observations that modern man, “is geared to television . . . can't understand terms like justification . . . can't understand thee's and thou's . . . can't believe the gospel because of a scientific worldview . . . needs to be addressed in the modern idiom of art and culture . . . has a dislike of dogmatic assertions . . . shouldn't be spoken down to . . . and needs dialogue . . . and . . . can't relate to long sermons,” he opined that such a view of modern man was “wrong in general, wrong in fact, and wrong in experience.” David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), 124-27. The fact that he addressed such views reveals that they are the perennial problem of the church going about its mission. His response dismissed the notion that the church should make any accommodation for the world to understand its message, “It is our business as preachers to show that our gospel is essentially different and that we are not talking about ordinary matters . . . The fact is the world expects us to be different; and this idea that you can win the world by showing that after all you are very similar to it, with scarcely any difference at all, or but a very slight one, is basically wrong not only theologically but even psychologically.” (p.131, 139).

<sup>52</sup> John MacArthur, “Our Sufficiency for Outreach: An Interview with John MacArthur About His Controversial Book,” *Leadership* 12 (Fall 1991): 139.

<sup>53</sup> John MacArthur, How Shall We Then Worship? *Voice* (Sept/Oct 1995): 7-9.

<sup>54</sup> In a personal conversation with David Wells he maintained his critical posture toward drama in the church by appealing to the (apparent) absence of its use in the New Testament—an indication, in his theology, that God must not want it used anytime in the church. If this thinking were to be taken to its logical conclusion, we should abolish church music, youth ministry, the use of media, etc. and, of course, some would argue that we should.

warns the world against its ways and provides the church as the only alternative to the world. To change the church, therefore, and to adapt the ministries of the church to the world is to minimize God's design for the church and to change "the traditional defining features of the church." To these critics, attempts at cultural relevance overlook the radically counter-cultural nature of the church and in the process lose one of the churches most appealing features to true seekers. As David Wells says, ". . . the fact is that when the church is authentic, when it is true to its nature as a possession of God, its cultural irrelevance becomes a very real virtue. . . . it will be compelling . . . to embody a fitting countercultural spirituality centered in a serious, worshipful recognition of the presence of God, an obedient submission to his Word, and a compassionate outworking of his grace in loving service of the stricken of the world."<sup>55</sup>

Still others say that cultural relevance is an appropriate but risky goal. However, they raise cautions about much that is done in the name of reaching the seeker. Their concern is that things essential to the nature of the church are compromised—at best decentralized and at worst sacrificed. Os Guinness writes compellingly of the need to let truth be the driving force for relevance rather than the reverse:

*For the church-growth movement, what matters are the breeding grounds in which such ironies and unintended consequences multiply. Two are paramount. The first breeding ground is the more traditional one: the uncritical espousal of the ideal of "relevance" and its companion church-growth slogans, "seeker-friendly," "audience-driven," and "full-service churches."*

*As stated earlier, relevance is a prerequisite for communication. Without it, there is no communication, only a one-sided sending of messages addressed to no one, nowhere. But having said that, it must also be said that relevance is a more complex, troublesome, and seductive matter than its advocates acknowledge.*

*For a start, relevance is a question-begging concept when invoked by itself. And when absolutized, relevance becomes lethal to truth. Properly speaking, relevance assumes and requires the answer to such questions as: Relevance for what? Relevant to whom? If these questions are left unasked, a constant appeal to relevance becomes a way of riding roughshod over truth and corraling opinion coercively. People are thinking or doing something simply "because it is relevant" without knowing why. But truth, in fact, gives relevance to "relevance," just as "relevance" becomes irrelevance if it is not related to truth. Without truth, relevance is meaningless and dangerous.*

*In addition, relevance has a false allure that makes both its built-in transience and its catch-22 demand. Dean Inge captured the transience in his celebrated line "He who marries the spirit of the age soon becomes a widower." But it was Simone Weil who highlighted the catch-22: "To be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal." . . . "Hell," it has been said, "will be full of newspapers with a fresh edition every thirty seconds, so that no one will ever feel caught up."<sup>56</sup>*

Guinness has an uncanny ability to know what those who espouse cultural relevance uncritically are doing after a church service, ". . . the typical church staff question after worship becomes 'How did it go?'"<sup>57</sup> Additionally, as Greg Pritchard points out, any attempt at cultural relevance is fraught with the danger of backfiring:

*The psychological categories Hybels teaches, however, become fundamental categories for how Willow Creek Christians view themselves, their relationships, and life in general. Ironically, while Hybels is evangelizing those in the world toward Christianity, he is also evangelizing Christians toward the world. As the unchurched Harrys in the audience (10 percent) move closer to Christianity, the Christians in the audience (90 percent) are often becoming more psychological and worldly.*

*This tendency to compromise Christian truth is built into this model of the church. An unintended consequence of this approach to doing church is the latent temptation to water down the biblical message with the culture's categories.<sup>58</sup>*

Most advocates of the seeker church do not argue that features essential to the nature or the message of the church must be changed. They ask only for those things described in previous chapters that obscure the true nature of the church to be changed. Cultural irrelevance that results from being a true expression of the church of God is worth keeping. Yet these concerns must be weighed heavily by seeker church leaders and a determination made whether "relevance" has become more of a driving force than the expression of truth in a relevant way. There is a world of difference between a church striving to communicate a timeless message in a culturally relevant way and settling for communicating a culturally relevant message. I believe most seeker churches aim for the former but some are doing the latter. Yet, this simple distinction can save us from heresy. Later chapters will further examine this issue. We will now deal with the application of the principle of cultural relevance in the use of seeker services and how that affects the purposes of the church, particularly the worship and teaching ministry of the church.

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<sup>55</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 224. Additionally Os Guinness opines 'there is an advantage to the irrelevance of being trans-cultural and trans-historical.' Os Guinness and John Seel, eds, *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 170.

<sup>56</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 62-63.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>58</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 238-239.

## Do Seeker Services Compromise The Purposes Of The Church?

The purpose statement of most seeker churches includes exaltation (worship), edification (maturing believers), evangelism (making disciples through reaching the world) and extension (serving human and spiritual needs beyond the local church). Some critics argue against the seeker church movement by saying the primary purposes for the church are exaltation and edification; believers gather to exalt and be edified and scatter to evangelize. Consequently, seeker services are compromising the primary purposes of the church by gathering to evangelize. John MacArthur is the most prominent spokesperson for this group:

*... My calling as pastor is to lift God's people before the Lord, to bring his Word to his people, and to equip them for their calling. Unbelievers, in a sense, are incidental (my emphasis) to that primary purpose... the biblical pattern is that the church gathers to worship and be edified. It scatters to evangelize.*

*... Church meetings are not supposed to be designed for unbelievers. According to Scripture, the church comes together for worship, fellowship, edification, and mutual encouragement within the body (Acts 20:7ff; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; Heb. 10:24-25). The preaching of God's Word is to be the essential focal point for all corporate worship and ministry (1 Tim. 6:2; 2 Tim 4:2). The emphasis should be prayerful, adoring communion with God, not entertainment or any expression of self-indulgence (1 Cor. 11:17-22). In short, the activities outlined in Acts 2:42 are the only valid business of the church: "the apostles' teaching... fellowship... the breaking of bread and... prayer."<sup>59</sup>*

In response to John MacArthur's criticisms, many seeker church leaders would say that this exclusive focus on meeting the needs of the "already convinced" comes at the expense of seekers and is part of the reason why they started their seeker services in the first place. The strength of the traditional model is that it addresses the needs of a believer directly during the main church event of the week. The great weakness is that too many churches unnecessarily alienate the seeker and see no effective evangelism take place. Additionally, while the Bible may provide descriptions of the early church, it is not prescribing this is all that must ever happen whenever the church comes together. Only if seeker churches do not give adequate attention to the purposes of the church in all of their activities as a whole could this charge of compromising the primary purposes of the church apply; even seeker services can serve the purposes of worship, fellowship and edification, as we shall see later. David L. Wells balances the tension well: "The job of Christianity is to worship God by the winning of souls."<sup>60</sup> Any church doing a good job of both worship and winning souls is on target. However, seeker services may unintentionally undermine the purposes of the church if they are either misunderstood or their ministry is not supplemented.

Joseph Stowell, President of the Moody Bible Institute, challenges the seeker church to structure creative forms to carry out uncompromising function when he says . . .

*There is a basic maxim in architecture. It is that form follows function. An architect could have a dream of developing a tall building with tiers of stairs leading to its pillared porch, whose large brass doors would provide entry to a massive marbled foyer graced by great staircases that flow from one floor to the other. While the building may be a stunning statement, enhance the landscape, bring great credit and glory to the architect, and be hailed by both media and masses as a great technological advance, if the primary function of the building is to be a center for the physically challenged, then no matter how glorious the form is, it has worked against the function. . . .  
... When godly shepherds figure out how to do ministry in a pagan environment by structuring creative and effective forms through which to carry out uncompromised function, they will be well positioned to be used by God regardless of the times in which they minister.<sup>61</sup>*

## Are Seeker Services A Church Service, An Evangelistic Or Pre-Evangelistic Event?

Some maintain that the seeker model, by placing the priority of evangelism over the priority of worship and edification, has compromised Biblical purity. Os Guinness notes: ". . . many 'seeker-friendly' churches have quite deliberately subordinated both worship and discipleship to evangelism, and evangelism to entertainment, and in the process subverted the traditional defining features of the church."<sup>62</sup> Those "defining features of the church" are not only the purposes for which the church exists but also the concept of what is meant by "the church service." In the seeker movement, this concept has gone through a radical change with few being fully aware of the implications and unintended consequences of the changes. Depending on how far one takes the focus on seekers on Sunday morning (seeker-sensitive or seeker targeted

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<sup>59</sup> John MacArthur, "Our Sufficiency for Outreach," 134; John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 151-52. John MacArthur adds: "One dear woman, struggling in a church that has embraced all the modern fads, recently complained, 'When is the church going to stop trying to entertain the goats and get back to feeding the sheep?'" John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like The World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 72.

<sup>60</sup> David L. Wells, *Pulpit Helps*, (Apr. 1989) 1; not the David F. Wells quoted extensively in this thesis.

<sup>61</sup> Stowell, *Shepherding the Church*, 35, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 79.

for example), the Sunday morning service is no longer a church service but an evangelistic or pre-evangelistic event for seekers.

Some seeker churches have not wrestled with the issue that the “congregation” does not now meet on Sunday morning (and may not meet significantly at any other time!). Rick Warren readily concedes that at Saddleback the Sunday morning “crowd” is not the “congregation” of traditional churches.<sup>63</sup> All this obviously raises the issue of when the “church” meets and how to measure the size and health of the “church.” It is too easy for seeker churches to refer to having “x” number of members when in fact they have “x” number of attenders, of which relatively few may be as involved as “members” normally are. The people coming are no longer the congregation but a crowd, among whom the unidentified congregation may or may not be in attendance and may or may not meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

In addition, the “crowd” is no longer participating in an event that models or practices the traditionally and Biblically defining features of the church. Sally Morgenthaler laments, “Many congregations are now following the lead of churches like Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL and including pre-evangelistic, non-worship programs for seekers (seeker services) in their outreach.”<sup>64</sup> Morgenthaler takes an extreme view of a seeker service to make a point:

*What is distinctive about a Willow Creek seeker event? Essentially, it is pre-evangelistic entertainment, a highly captivating, sixty minute “infomercial” for Christianity. Both thought provoking and touching, it operates as a catalyst for further investigation of the Christian faith. . . .*

*The current trend toward offering seeker events would be quite positive if it were not for two significant developments. First it is becoming more and more difficult for seeker-driven churches (those who have adopted the seeker-event approach) to establish or maintain worship as their number one priority. Second, there is now a widespread tendency within evangelism to equate seeker events with worship.<sup>65</sup>*

A further complication, if Sunday morning is now a seeker event, is the tendency for seekers who become believers to remain attached to the seeker event at the expense of other worship and teaching opportunities. Seeker church leaders discover “what you win people with you win them to.” As one leader of a seeker-driven church admits, “Unfortunately, whatever your introductory orientation is in a church, that becomes your point of reference. Those who come to Christ through a seeker (event) have the tendency to make that event ‘home’.”<sup>66</sup> Cultural relevance may indeed become an “exercise in cultural adjustment and surrender” unless it is seen as the first step and not the last. Os Guinness warns:

*Without maintaining critical tension, the principle of identification is a recipe for compromise and capitulation. It is no accident that the charge of being “all things to all people” has become a popular synonym for compromise. If the process of becoming “all things to all people” is to remain faithful to Christ, it has to climax in clear persuasion and profound conversion. Joining people where they are is only the first step in the process, not the last. Unless it resists this danger, the megachurch and church-growth movement will prove to be a gigantic exercise in cultural adjustment and surrender. . . .*

*. . . Put differently, “all things to all people” means it is perfectly legitimate to convey the gospel in cartoons to a non-literary generation incapable of rising above MTV and USA Today. But five years later, if the new disciples are truly won to Christ, they will be reading and understanding Paul’s letter to the Romans and not simply the Gospel According to Peanuts.<sup>67</sup>*

Compounding this tendency to equate seeker events with a seeker service is that many seeker churches now program the seeker event for a small minority of seekers present at the expense of the genuine needs of the far greater majority of believers who are present. What often makes any discussion of this issue difficult are the assumptions and sometimes wild exaggerations often made by seeker church leaders about the percentage of the crowd in attendance on a Sunday morning who are seekers.<sup>68</sup> No doubt, seeker churches are more evangelistically effective, but in most cases claims that seekers comprise 30-40% of the Sunday morning crowd are exaggerated. The critics rightly argue that many of the “unknowns” in the crowd are believers from other churches doing a little church shopping at the newest item in town and they may be right. Willow Creek often becomes a victim of its own publicity; the dust jacket of one book describes an author as a

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<sup>63</sup> Warren says, “At Saddleback, we know that many who attend our crowd services have questionable lifestyles, sinful habits, and even notorious reputations. That doesn’t bother us. We make a distinction between the crowd (uncommitted attenders) and the congregation (our membership). The congregation, not the crowd, is the church. The crowd service is just a place where members can bring unbelieving friends to whom they’ve been personally witnessing.” In *The Purpose Driven Church*, 217.

<sup>64</sup> Sally Morgenthaler, “Worship--The Real Thing: Confronting The Non-Worship Epidemic,” *Worship Leader* 4, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 1995): 26-31.

<sup>65</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> Sally Morgenthaler interview with Ed DeYoung, programming director, Grace Fellowship Church, Timonium, MD, 2 Sept, 1993 in Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 44.

<sup>67</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> The tendency to emphasize, exaggerate and even take pride in ones ability to relate to and reach the unchurched is a common Christian weakness. It surfaces as a ‘my neighbor is more pagan than your neighbor attitude’ and a tendency to inflate the church’s effectiveness in how many unchurched are in attendance.

teacher at Willow Creek “where he regularly speaks to the 16,000 spiritual seekers who visit its services each weekend.” Some estimate that the percentage of unchurched attending Willow Creek is more like ten to twenty percent of the crowd-- and much less in other churches. Pritchard observes:

*A full 91 percent of those surveyed at a Willow Creek weekend service listed their “highest value” as “having a deep personal relationship to God.” It is unlikely that an unchurched visitor would list a relationship with God as his or her highest priority, especially when only 31 percent of unchurched individuals say that religion is “very important” in their lives.*

*Following these figures, I would estimate the unchurched in attendance at any one weekend service is between 10 and 20 percent. The point is, Hybels’s primary message is directed to a relatively small percent of the audience. Probably 80 to 90 percent of the audience already have made a commitment to Christ.<sup>69</sup>*

Seeker churches need to understand accurately the role of their main event for seekers. Is it a church service, an evangelistic or pre-evangelistic seeker event? And is it the starting place for discipleship or a transition to the believers service?

### **Do Most Believers Go Beyond The Seeker Service/Event?**

While the great strength of a seeker-oriented approach to ministry is that it starts where seekers are, the great weakness is that it often leaves seekers and believers at that same place. Many lukewarm believers “hide” from growth, service and involvement in the anonymity of a seeker service and the seeker service becomes their primary spiritual diet. Don Hustad asks whether,

*... too many of the fifteen thousand people who attend Willow Creek on Saturday night and Sunday morning are not really unchurched, but rather fairly-longtime Christians, who may be hiding from their discipleship responsibility in the anonymity of the large crowd. Further, they are substituting entertainment (plus a good sermon) for a full experience of true worship.<sup>70</sup>*

From my time in attendance at Willow Creek and observing seeker churches since then, this caution rings true. It is vital to ask, “How many believers actually attend the worship and teaching service designed for them?” By all accounts, throughout the seeker church movement it is somewhere between 5% and 25% of the Sunday morning crowd and rarely more than 30%.<sup>71</sup> Low attendance is compounded by infrequent services--many churches that take a seeker approach now only have a bi-monthly or monthly service for believers. If close to 90% of attenders at a seeker event are believers and two-thirds of them miss the worship and teaching service how can the church claim its believers service is a priority? Compounding this problem is the fact that for seeker churches the total community that may consider a church their home church is much larger than the “crowd” in attendance on any given Sunday morning. The reasons for this are related to the “come as you are” philosophy and the infrequent attendance of many seekers. This puts the attendance at the believers service in an even worse light; many seeker churches may be doing a seeker event on Sunday morning and then seeing 10% or less of their believers returning for worship and teaching. In short, a heavy emphasis on events for “Unchurched Seekers” can result in “Underchurched Believers.”

Thus in many seeker churches the majority of believers in the church have no meaningful corporate worship and teaching experience. This has given rise to what some critics call the “*churched Larry problem*” or as one author puts it, “seeker-sensitivity equals saint-stagnation”:

*In a purely evangelistic setting this strategy of simplifying Christian theology is appropriate. Most nonbelievers need to understand the pure milk of the gospel rather than meaty messages of Christian truth. Yet the majority of Willow Creek weekend attenders are churched Larrys who have already made a commitment to Christ. They do not attend the weekday worship services, so the only theological teaching they receive is the week-end’s user-friendly Christianity 101 and the basic salvation message. These churched Larrys are not receiving enough biblical feeding on the weekend to grow to spiritual maturity.<sup>72</sup>*

What is worrying about this is not only that believers are growing weaker through lack of worship and teaching but that so many church leaders are ignoring the issue.

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<sup>69</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 238.

<sup>70</sup> Don Hustad, “Christian Worship: Is This One of God’s Terrible Springtimes?” *Cruz* 28, no. 4 (1992): 30.

<sup>71</sup> See the letter in Appendix H recording a discussion by several pastors at a Willow Creek conference in 1996 for statistics from several churches. Kimon Howland Sargeant also cites the example of Kensington Community Church in Michigan as seeing 1300 attend the seeker service, 200 attend the believers service, and 375 attend small groups. This means that for 1000 “attenders” their only connection to the church is through the anonymity of the seeker service—wonderful if they are all seekers but disastrous if the majority are believers (Sargeant, *Faithband Fulfillment*, 33).

<sup>72</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 275-76.

## Is Worship Considered A Priority In A Seeker Service/Event?

Many seeker churches feel that worship is unhelpful and unnecessary in a seeker service. Those planning the services rarely give attention to cultivating a longing for a serious, worshipful sense of the presence of God. Consequently, a main concern of many critics is that seeker events are a performance as entertainment for spectators at the expense of worship as engagement with God for participants. Performance at its worst is pretense and worship do not mix; worship should be God-centered, a seeker-service is seeker-centered and the two vie for priority. Worship is not our subjective response to a platform-driven program; nor is worship a spectator sport. As one author puts it, the church is more than “an audience positively inclined toward Jesus, but a company of committed individuals whose lives depend upon the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord.”<sup>73</sup> Stephen Charnock cuts to the core of the issue: “when we believe that we should be satisfied rather than God glorified in our worship then we put God below ourselves as though He had been made for us rather than that we had been made for him.”<sup>74</sup> A seeker strategy taken to an extreme falls into the trap of mistaking marketing for worship. Marva Dawn puts it concisely, “. . . it is a misnomer to call such services ‘worship’ if their purpose is to attract people rather than adore God.”<sup>75</sup> A number of other critics make this point:

*The worshiper-as-spectator view sees worship primarily as entertainment to enjoy, critique, and evaluate. The consumer of worship is not God, but the so-called worshiper. . . . When the distinction is blurred, the whole purpose of the church is in danger of coming under the unbiblical influences of our contemporary and consumer-oriented culture.*<sup>76</sup>

*The fact is, great musical performances, thought-provoking drama, touching testimonies, relevant messages, and apologetics about God and faith are wonderful tools God can use to touch the seeker’s mind and heart. However, these do not require any sort of response from those in attendance. They don’t engage the listener in any of the active expressions of worship: heartfelt praise, adoration, reverence, thanksgiving, repentance, confession or commitment.*<sup>77</sup>

At first sight, worship and seeker services do not seem to mix well. If the priority is to put on a weekly creative and relevant seeker event, worship may seem like an intrusion. And at their worst, the benefits of creativity in a seeker event can become the jarring distractions of novelty in a worship service. The applause that relaxes the seeker puts another spotlight on the performer and the focus on how the outsider will perceive us distracts from putting the focus on God in faith that he will be magnified. Occasionally, the drive to program for something relevant and creative overrides common sense and the sanctity of the occasion. The result is that the gravity of the message of the gospel is undermined.

Again, the central issue is that the character of the church is often determined by its main event. If the things that are foundational to the church are eliminated from its main event, this will shape the character of the church and its members. Many churches now have large numbers of people turning up at a weekly Sunday morning seeker event while a few exhausted believers try to regroup at a believers service that has all the appeal of watching a “B” movie. In many cases, seeker churches have failed due to the lack of focus on the spiritual growth of the believer coupled with the enormous effort in ministry it takes to pull off seeker events and services. The core of believers in some seeker churches are busy to the point of exhaustion. Willow Creek encourages attendance at Sunday morning, Wednesday night, a small group and involvement in an area(s) of ministry. Some seeker churches try to emulate that but eventually, for the committed core, the fuel runs out and ministry becomes a performance with the tank on empty.<sup>78</sup> In an attempt to reach the seeker, some seeker churches are laboring with a distinct lack of any sense of transcendence or a connection with Almighty God through worship. New churches and small churches with a few hundred believers find they can not reproduce the dynamic atmosphere of Willow Creek in its early days; yet they are overlooking the opportunity that worship affords to provide an environment that is alive with expectation.

While many churches in the seeker church movement have all but eliminated worship from their seeker events, many others have found worship to be a vital ingredient in seeing seekers come to faith in Christ. The truth is that worship and seeker events can mix if carefully handled. Seekers need to meet Christ in the gathered body of believers, not just hear convincing arguments about him. They need to catch a glimpse of believers being real before Almighty God; they need to sense his presence; they need to be struck with the fact that believers are not just putting on a program to impress seekers with their beliefs; they also need to know they are not the most important person in the room; and all of this is a by-product

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<sup>73</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Wenz, *Room for God?: A Worship Challenge for a Church-Growth and Marketing Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 34.

<sup>75</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 81.

<sup>76</sup> Wenz, *Room for God?* 73.

<sup>77</sup> Morgenthaler, “Worship--The Real Thing,” 26-31.

<sup>78</sup> See the letter in Appendix H recording a discussion by several pastors at a Willow Creek conference in 1996. The hurdles to involvement in the Believers service were thought to be 1) Lack of child care 2) Lack of peoples time to be involved in three major ministries 3) The feeling by many believers that the seeker service met their spiritual needs and 4) The quality of the believers service does not match the quality of the seeker service.

of worship. Due to the “churched Larry” issues and a growing awareness that worship enhances (not hinders) evangelism, Cumberland Community Church has for a number of years regularly included anywhere from four to six worship songs and sometimes a hymn as a traditional touch-point—often after the message as an opportunity for people to express their hearts to God. Commonly referred to as “worship evangelism” this spontaneous phenomenon is profoundly affecting the seeker church movement. Sally Morgenthaler in her book *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers Into The Presence of God* has pointed out what a true movement of God worship evangelism is:

*One of the most outstanding characteristics of worship evangelism is that it is a thoroughly grassroots phenomenon, comprised of hundreds of separately inspired and acting churches. In all of my travels and interviewing, I encountered only a handful of churches whose worship-witnessing paradigm had been the direct result of contact with another congregation.*

*Such a “serendipitous,” individualized process represents a notable departure from the model-based trends of the past decade and would seem to indicate not only a movement whose time has come but one that has been divinely initiated. Whatever one concludes, worship evangelism can no longer be ignored or smugly dismissed as some sort of ministry fluke. It has already made too big of an impact over too wide a denominational range. What’s more, it carries with it all the conceptual and theological underpinnings necessary for longevity.”<sup>79</sup>*

She has done the seeker church movement a great service by explaining the case for such a worship reformation:

*In the 1970s and 80s, much of the evangelical church experienced a worship revolution: an upheaval of traditional worship forms brought on by a belated, yet significant, “cultural awakening.” Today I believe we are in the midst of a worship reformation, a movement that continues to address the issue of worship form (relevance) but stretches way beyond form to the core of worship itself—biblical substance. Consequently, it is a worship movement with more lifereaching, life-changing potential than anything the evangelical church has seen in the last seventy-five years.”<sup>80</sup>*

Morgenthaler has clearly shown how worship can become a vital part of a seeker church. She argues that to limit seekers from a dynamic, supernatural exchange between God and his people is like, “locking up the supermarket the day before Thanksgiving!”<sup>81</sup> She uses Gerrit Gustafson’s definition of worship evangelism as, “wholehearted worshipers calling the whole world to the whole hearted worship of God . . . [and] the fusion of the power of God’s presence with the power of the gospel.”<sup>82</sup> She argues that worship comprises nearness, knowledge, vulnerability and interaction with God at a seeker service otherwise it is no more than a public Christian event:

*The most significant benefit of a worship service is connecting with God. It does not matter how chatty and interesting the celebrity interviews, how captivating the drama, how stunning the soloist, or how relevant the message. When personal interaction with God is absent, church loses much of its appeal. . . .*

*In real worship, we carry on an exchange of love with the God who is present, the God who speaks to us in the now, who has done and is going marvelous things. And it is this supernatural exchange—this interaction between the God of Scripture and God’s people—that is the primary difference between a public Christian event and Christian worship. . . .*

*Just how does evangelism take place in a service that is “fully worship”? It happens in two ways: first, as unbelievers hear the truth about God (through worship songs, prayers, Communion, baptism, Scripture, testimonies, dramas, and so on); and second—and more importantly—as they observe the real relationship between worshipers and God.”<sup>83</sup>*

As many would affirm from experience she says, “With any experience of God’s nearness comes all the blessings of God’s divine nature: renewal (Hos. 6:3; Acts 3:19), power for change (2 Cor. 3:17-18), deliverance (Psa. 97:3), comfort (Isa. 51:12), joy (Psa. 16:11; Isa 51:11) and peace (Isa 9:6). It is no coincidence that these are the very things for which the world is longing and searching.” She also reminds us, “Worship without a sense of God’s manifest presence is like having a conversation with oneself.”<sup>84</sup>

Rick Warren likewise argues for worship in the seeker service in chapter entitled “Worship Can Be a Witness.” In a section headed “Twelve Convictions About Worship” he concedes that only true believers can worship God, and that “God expects us to be sensitive to the fears, hang-ups, and needs of unbelievers when they are present in our worship services”; but he also endorses worship evangelism: “Worship is a powerful witness to unbelievers if God’s presence is felt

<sup>79</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 282-283.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>82</sup> Gerrit Gustafson, “Worship Evangelism,” *Charisma and Christian Life*, (Oct. 1991): 50, as quoted in Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 93.

<sup>83</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 23, 48, 88.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 97-98, 99. Morgenthaler also has an excellent list of principles for planning a worship evangelism service: 1. Make it your number one goal to lead busters into God’s presence. 2. Be real, not slick. 3. Strive for excellence in everything you do. 4. Create players, not spectators. 5. Be anything but boring. 6. Be personal. Be relational. Be a community. 7. Be relevant. 8. Feature busters up front. 9. Mix up the music. 10. Go back to your roots. 11. Go deep into Scripture. 12. Respect their time. 13. Have fun!

and if the message is understandable. . . . Both of these elements are essential in order for worship to be a witness. First, God's presence must be sensed in the service. More people are won to Christ by feeling God's presence than by all of our apologetic arguments combined. . . . At the same time, the worship and the message need to be understandable. . . . I've noticed that when unbelievers watch believers relate to God in an intelligent, sincere manner, it creates a desire in them to know God too."<sup>85</sup> Dieter Zander also recognized that New Song Community Church's experiment in removing worship from their seeker services had led them astray from being true to Scripture and to who they were. He makes the following point about their ministry to busters:

*You know what attracts busters? It's when we are worshipping the Lord in a way that is real and in a culturally relevant manner. That includes using music with an edge to it. But mostly it's when we invite people with the sense that God is present. He wants to meet with you, he wants to know you, and he wants you to know him. That's what the church is all about. We said, "This is what we're going to be now, and we're not going to make any apologies for it." Then we also said, "We're really going to get back to teaching through the Bible in a way that helps busters understand what the Bible says and how it applies to their lives."<sup>86</sup>*

The experience of Grace Fellowship Church in Baltimore also throws light on this issue. They found that not only did their own people prefer to bring unchurched friends to the believers service but that quite a number of the unchurched preferred the worship service over the seeker service. Worship leader Ed DeYoung puts it this way: "The seeker service was too presentational for many of our newcomers. We spent a lot of our energy being seeker friendly, and in doing so we stripped out a lot of what they were coming to see. I think quite a few of the unchurched newcomers wanted to examine not only Christianity, but Christians—our integrity, our authenticity, and our interaction with God in worship."<sup>87</sup>

It is remarkable that Willow Creek makes little reference to this issue in any of their written materials. There is no reference to the centrality of worship in their Ten Values position paper nor do they address the point in the rebuttal of criticisms of the church in the W.C.A. newsletter series "Myths about a Movement: Answers to Common Misunderstandings about Seeker-Oriented Churches."<sup>88</sup> In fact, Willow Creek's conviction on not worshipping in a seeker service dates back to the 1970's when worship to most people meant organs, choirs, and robes. But in the last twenty years there has been a worship revolution and the unchurched can relate to the type of worship in most contemporary churches—even if they must still be given permission to observe and not participate.

### **Is Biblical Teaching Considered A Priority In A Seeker Service/Event?**

Some seeker churches minimize the use of the Bible and even misuse the Bible in their seeker services. Some pastors do not use a Bible at the podium at all on the basis that seekers do not want dogmatism. Consequently, in many seeker churches very few believers carry their Bibles to a seeker-service/event. What is missing, however, is more important than the number of Bibles—it is that seekers do not begin to see that God speaks through the Bible to them today. The Bible is also misused when it becomes a proof-text for an agenda set by the culture. Greg Pritchard has pointed out how many of the messages of seeker churches can tend toward three simple truths—"it works" (psychology), "it's true" (apologetics), and "it's useful" (business management).<sup>89</sup> Webster observes, "Pastors use Scripture as a platform from which to launch Christianized self-help talks. Therapy is disguised as theology, and preaching is promoted as performance."<sup>90</sup> Some pastors sprinkle their favorite verses throughout a talk that could have been as fitting for the local Rotary Club. Messages come out sounding like warmed up "Chicken Soup for The Soul"—very good for the common cold but useless for the cancer of the soul that afflicts modern men and women. Or like re-runs from late night info-mercials—lots of giant-killer tips to make you all you want to be and more. One author describes this misuse of the Bible as the way seeker churches have "tried so hard to package it for easy consumption that it no longer sounds like Jesus."<sup>91</sup>

Some would call this preaching to the "felt needs" of the seeker. However, the unchurched also need exposure to Biblical truth that will show them their "real needs." For example, a person's felt need may be to get out of debt. Good Bible teaching will inevitably deal with the problem of financial stress; but the greater issue that must be addressed is the impossibility of serving both God and Mammon and the need to serve God alone as master (Matthew 6:24). Seeker

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<sup>85</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 241-242.

<sup>86</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 206.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 243

<sup>88</sup> See Appendix C and "Myths About a Movement: Answers to Common Misunderstandings about Seeker-Oriented Churches," *WCA News*, Vol. 5 No. 5 (Sept/Oct 97).

<sup>89</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 278.

<sup>90</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 126-27.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

churches must both offer helpful teaching for felt needs and apply Biblical teaching to real needs (this will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter).

Additionally, a seeker-focused pre-occupation makes it more difficult to address issues that seeker and believer need to understand—issues that only come from the revelation contained in the Word of God. These kind of topics would include God’s judgement and holiness and the coming again of Christ. Likewise, topics that arise from a Biblical worldview and clash with the culture become difficult to present when the main goal is to woo the seeker. These topics include abortion, homosexuality, divorce, and sexual purity. The critics would argue that the church will always be out of step with the world and that when the church becomes totally identified with modern culture it will cease to have anything to say to it. Consequently, it will no longer be able to address the world with prophetic revelation. It is easy to develop such an affinity with the “seeker” that nothing must be said that would upset or confront him.

Where the primary focus is seekers, the tendency is also to put discipleship themes on the back burner. Hendriks warns against “. . . ‘McDoctrine’—spiritual fast-food of proof-texts and cliches that are filling and fattening, but not particularly nourishing.”<sup>92</sup> It is very difficult to move from self-interest to self-denial. Sadly, the true call to follow Christ has been so obscured by human potential preaching, self-esteem boosters, and inspirational warm-fuzzies that it is difficult to know when someone does respond whether they are responding to the gospel or to the idea of being involved with such a great group of people with such “neat” beliefs. Even if some do come to faith in Christ, they then bring their friends and a fresh round of seekers must be addressed with seeker level-messages.

While seeker messages may be appropriate for seeker events and it may be thrilling to see the number of new believers, this steady diet of seeker-level messages shapes the character of the church through its main weekly event and could be disastrous if not addressed. The answer could lie in a service for believers but as discussed earlier, a relatively small percentage of believers attend the believers service where better Biblical teaching is provided.

Another problem undermines the quality of Biblical teaching in seeker churches that offer a separate service for believers. It is that the primary message of the week (in terms of the presentation of Biblical truth to believers), at the believers service, is often afforded the least preparation and study time for the pastor and delivered to a small minority of the congregation. By contrast, the primary message on Sunday morning (in terms of the presentation of a seeker message) is given most preparation and is delivered to a majority of believers and a relatively small percentage of seekers. Additionally, the pressure to program creative, relevant, excellent services week after week often leaves a pastor and program staff grasping for the best drama or media, letting that drive the topic and finding (sparse) Biblical support for the message. Most seeker church pastors would recognize the temptation to find a good drama and build a topical message around it instead of letting the Bible speak to the messenger first and then going on to prepare the message. But can a diet of drama-driven, culturally relevant topical messages really be the whole counsel of God for the church today? This is doubtful.

This time the flagship churches cannot be blamed for the problem. Willow Creek acknowledges that the purpose of the seeker service is also to teach believers.<sup>93</sup> It probably has stronger Biblical teaching at its seeker event than many seeker churches. Additionally, they would claim that none of the hard teachings of Scripture should be compromised. In response to the objection that, “Seeker churches shy away from hard teachings of the Bible” their newsletter says, “Willow creek frequently and boldly teaches about subjects like these: the judgment day and hell, sin, Jesus being the only way to God, Christ’s payment for sins, homosexual practices, abortion, sexual intimacy, and the authority of the Bible.”<sup>94</sup> Rick Warren is also clear on the place of Biblical teaching in the seeker service: “A worship service does not have to be shallow to be seeker sensitive. The message doesn’t have to be compromised, just understandable . . . the unchurched are not asking for a watered-down message—they expect to hear the Bible when they come to church. What they *do* want is to hear how the Bible relates to their lives in terms they understand and in a tone that shows you respect and care about them.”<sup>95</sup> At Cumberland Community Church, we have done expository series on books of the Bible, series on the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the fruit of the Spirit, and other Biblically based topics. Additionally, we provide one-hour Discovery Seminars for believers before the seeker service. Discovery Seminars are multiple offerings of Biblical topics not unlike adult Sunday School.

It is mistaken to assume that if a church becomes seeker-oriented it will necessarily hinder the growth of believers. To pass off all teaching in seeker churches as necessarily shallow, as some critics do, is to reveal ignorance. It has happened and will happen—in some places—but again, this myth assumes that Biblical teaching must be eliminated from a seeker service and that the seeker events can not be supplemented with other forums for good teaching. Far from hindering the

<sup>92</sup> William D. Hendriks, *Exit Interviews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 284.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Lee Strobel’s conversation with Greg Pritchard in *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 146.

<sup>94</sup> Myth #2 in “Myths about a Movement: Answers to Common Misunderstandings about Seeker-Oriented Churches” *WCA News*, Vol. 5 No. 5 (Sept/Oct 97): 3.

<sup>95</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 244.

growth of believers, seeker churches can actually give a fresh look at what it means to grow and provide a deeper commitment to that growth. The whole mission-focus of healthy seeker churches requires that they transform the congregation from an audience into an army. In this type of church average believers are faced with higher expectations and they grow or die.

### **Do Time-Honored Customs And Practices Have A Place At A Seeker Service/Event?**

Many church leaders discover the tension between Biblical purity and cultural relevance when trying to deal with the competing interests of seekers and the legitimate concerns for the traditional (in the good sense!) practices of the church. Some of the characteristics of church are no longer a good fit in a seeker event or service. These include Communion, prophetic preaching, prayer and penitence. Michael Horton expresses concern for the traditional features of a worship service, the ministry of the Word, prayer and Communion, and Christian fellowship:

*Perhaps the ministry of the Word (the apostles' teaching proclaimed and explained) will have to be shortened and somewhat weakened in terms of the heavy concentration of doctrine. Instead, the minister should offer a ten- or fifteen-minute "meditation" or inspirational reflection explaining how Christ can better serve the audience's needs and wants than any other product out there. The prayers will also have to go, since they are too long and boring. We have to keep the horizontal attraction in place. After all, if one loses the audience's attention for more than two minutes, studies show that they will not stay with the worship leader*

*As for Communion, it should not have a prominent and frequent place in the "worship celebration," since it takes too long and the unchurched do not want to be asked to get up and do anything when they are at church. It just doesn't keep things moving along very well, and people begin to feel self-conscious during the lulls (moments of silent prayer and self-examination). Heaven forbid that we should be brought face-to-face every Sunday with the law and our continuing sinfulness as believers and the need to confess our sins. Even if it is followed by the declaration of pardon, none of this is dealing with people's felt needs. It is all too much concerned with God's wrath and mercy rather than His help for me right now where I am most needy. And as for the "fellowship" part, unchurched Harry and Mary like to remain anonymous, as do most Christians, so instead of fellowship around the Word and the Lord's Table, we will let the visitors blend into the scenery. They can believe whatever they like or be engaged in a variety of unrepentant lifestyles, but we will make them feel at home and give them their anonymity.<sup>96</sup>*

There is an additional difficulty of introducing any element into the seeker service that slows the pace down or invites those in attendance to look inward in prayer or penitence. Don Carson challenges the demotion of the role of prayer in modern services:

*We have become so performance-oriented that it is hard to see how compromised we are. Consider one small example. In many of our churches, prayers in the morning services now function, in large measure, as the time to change the set in the sanctuary. The people of the congregation bow their heads and close their eyes, and when they look up a minute later, why, the singers are in place, or the drama group is ready to perform. It is all so smooth. It is also profane. Nominally we are in prayer together addressing the King of heaven, the sovereign Lord. In reality, some of us are doing that while others are rushing on tiptoes around the "stage" and others, with their eyes closed, are busy wondering what new and happy configuration will confront them when it is time to take a peek. Has the smoothness of the performance become more important to us than the fear of the Lord? Has polish, one of the modern equivalents to ancient rhetoric, displaced substance? Have professional competence and smooth showmanship become more valuable than sober reckoning over what it means to focus on Christ crucified?<sup>97</sup>*

Finally, there is a challenge in an environment filled with seekers to put meaningful emphasis on ministries outside the church--world missions, evangelism, social justice and care for the poor and the needy. Seekers have a social conscience so social care and justice makes sense to them. But world missions and evangelism are difficult to present to an audience of believers and seekers. Seeker churches also find it difficult to present missions and evangelism topics to their primary audience, the congregation, when so few attend the believers service and few such services occur. Additionally, as Douglas Webster says, "... the expenditure . . . to meet the high expectations of affluent baby boomers diverts resources from global missions and social justice concerns. The suburban market-driven church is isolationist. Its primary, if not exclusive, focus is on its designated baby boomer target audience."<sup>98</sup>

Cornelius Plantinga expresses all these issues brilliantly in an article entitled "The Seeker Service Dilemma (Questions About Changing Worship to Attract 'Non-Religious People')":

*. . . suppose you assume that these are largely non-religious people. Suppose you further assume that if you are to appeal to these non-religious people, your contemporary services must also become increasingly non-religious, . . .*

<sup>96</sup> John H. Armstrong, gen. ed., *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 254-55.

<sup>97</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Cross & Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 38ff.

<sup>98</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 90.

*You start to change things in your services. The non-religious haven't much of a feel for the holiness of God, so you do away with silent prayer and expressions of our littleness. Secularists don't like to confess their sins, so you remove the service of penitence.*

*In general, you assume that the non-religious like things simple and upbeat. That's where much of the popular culture is, after all, so away with lament, away with hard questions, expressions of anguish, dark ambiguities of any kind. While you're at it, away with creeds and confessions, away with explicit references to Christian doctrine, or to the history of the Christian church.*

*On the other hand, seekers are interested in improving themselves, so you maximize promises of personal growth and self-realization. Secularists do like pop music, so here it comes in the sanctuary, along with semi-celebrity music performers and audience applause.*

*Even if we fill the church with seekers, what have we gained? Indeed, what have we lost? What if by offering popularized religion as an appetizer for unbelievers we should accidentally spoil their appetite for the real thing? (my emphasis) Suppose your ten-year-old does not like your heart-healthy dinner menu, so you arrange a seeker meal for him in which you offer some non-threatening Pringles. You do this in order to set up his taste buds for baked potatoes. I wonder how often this would work.*

*Suppose a seeker came away from a service of the kind I've been describing . . . Suppose she came away and said to herself, Now I understand what the Christian faith is all about . . . The Christian faith is mainly about celebration and fun and personal growth and five ways to boost my self-esteem.*

*My question is again, a simple one: How do you prevent that conclusion? Or to put the question very generally: How likely is it that a popular God is really God? How likely is it that a user-friendly God will rebuke sin? Or save people with transcendent and unexpected force? Or have to suffer to do it? Or call us to suffering and discipline as well as to joy and freedom?<sup>99</sup>*

These issues ought to concern any pastor who is doing seeker ministry and genuinely wants to lead his people in worship but who sees a small proportion of them coming to a believers service. There may be no easy answers to these problems and different churches will try different solutions. Nevertheless, it is necessary that the seeker church movement face the issue of how to incorporate these elements into the regular practice of the church. For example, what should be the role of prayer in a seeker service—by using it as a chance to change the scenery are we missing an opportunity to minister to seekers at a much deeper, more spiritual level? Many seekers begin to respond to the gospel when they sense believers are interested enough in them to pray for their needs and when they see authentic prayer in the life of the believer. Some seeker churches offer a prayer time at the end of the service for anyone with special needs. These and other creative responses are what is needed if the seeker church movement is going to incorporate time-honored elements of church into its ministry.

## Conclusion

It is evident from the books and seminars of the main churches in the seeker church movement that they strive for an answer to the tension between Biblical purity and cultural relevance. The flagship seeker churches make it quite clear that Biblical purity may even be compromised by moving too far down the road of cultural relevance. Mark Mittelberg warns: "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."<sup>100</sup> They also make it clear that the necessity of Biblical purity demands a constant evaluation of our attempts at cultural relevance. David Olsson puts it this way,

*The most difficult question that each church must wrestle with before God is, "When does cultural relevancy undermine the biblically functioning community?" In other words, at what point is the adoption of a contemporary style pushed too far, compromising the life of the church and the honor of God? This is a challenge that must be confronted with every message preached, with every song sung, with every event programmed. Pastors who preach sanitized talk-show fodder, vocalists who play "rock star," or churches that stage purely sensational events with no substance or purpose other than to attract attention, produce a hollow imitation of the Church that caters to the applause of men.<sup>101</sup>*

In light of this an honest evaluation must be made by each seeker church of the seeker service and the overall ministry of the church. Are *all* the purposes of the church being fulfilled? Is the seeker service a church service or a seeker event? Do most believers avail themselves of worship and teaching opportunities outside the seeker service? Does worship and Biblical teaching have place of priority in the life of the church? Are meaningful traditions being unnecessarily abandoned? Without asking these hard questions (and making adjustments accordingly) seeker churches will have failed to realize the unintended compromises of Biblical purity that are inherent in their model of ministry.

However, the idea that a seeker-oriented church must necessarily lose the essential Biblical qualities of a great church or compromise the gospel is simply a myth. While there may be heightened tension between Biblical purity and cultural

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<sup>99</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "The Seeker Service Dilemma (Questions About Changing Worship to Attract 'Non-Religious People')," *Perspectives* 8 (May 1993): 24.

<sup>100</sup> Mittelberg and Groothuis, "The Seeker Church Movement," 54.

<sup>101</sup> Olsson, "Defining a Movement," 3.

relevance in the seeker church, there need be no compromise. Even some critics of the seeker church movement concede this. One author writes, “Such a biblical community can be seeker-sensitive without being consumer oriented. It can make the gospel interesting without being entertaining, and convicting without condemning. It can be both effective and faithful, serious and joyful, cross-generational and mission-focused. It can redefine felt needs and meet spiritual needs.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 12.

## CHAPTER 4

### CHALLENGES FOR THE SEEKER CHURCH: A CULTURE OF MODERNITY AND WORLDLINESS

*“ . . . the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for the modern Christians as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries.” Kenneth Myers<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

In his ABC News prime-time television special titled “In the Name of God,” Peter Jennings asked whether churches seeking “to attract sellout crowds are in danger of selling out the gospel.” Many contemporary scholars and theologians would commend Jennings for his insight and add their own critiques to his popularized assessment of the seeker church movement. Kimon Sargeant argues in two studies for the University of Virginia that seeker churches have invited modernity into the heart of the church.<sup>2</sup> Os Guinness sees a sociological knowledge-base driving effective evangelism in the seeker church.<sup>3</sup> *Dining with the Devil*, the title of his book, using an observation of sociologist Peter Berger, warns that whoever supps with the devil of modernity had better have a long spoon.<sup>4</sup> In an extensive critique of the idea of relevance, John Seel summarizes his concern: “through its uncritical engagement with modernity, the church is becoming its own most effective gravedigger.”<sup>5</sup> Church leaders also take issue with the results of modernity seen in the seeker church movement. These, and others, are common refrains of critics of the seeker church movement.<sup>6</sup>

Most critics agree that few seeker church leaders are knowingly corrupting the church’s mission and message. The consequences are “unintended” to use the jargon of the sociologist. In a discussion of American evangelicals as a case study of modernity John Seel maintains, “They it is who have brought the Trojan horse of modernity directly within the sanctuary, and their success has thus far drowned out cautionary voices . . .”<sup>7</sup> Os Guinness tells a story which reminds us that we embrace modernity’s benefits at our own risk--we cannot always discern wherein the danger lies:<sup>8</sup>

*Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev used to tell of a time when a wave of petty thefts hit the former USSR, and so the authorities put guards at all the factories. At one of the timberworks, in Leningrad the guard knew the workers well. The first evening, out came Pyotr Petrovich with a wheelbarrow and, on the wheelbarrow a great bulky sack with a suspicious-looking shape.*

*Come on Petrovich, said the guard, What have you got there?*

*Just sawdust and shavings, Petrovich replied.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1989), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Kimon Howland Sargeant, “Faith and Fulfillment: Willow Creek and the Future of Evangelicalism,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Virginia, 1996), 214. This was one of three compromises listed in Sargeant’s thesis. The other two were that “a form of pragmatism, rather than Biblical orthodoxy, informs the development and operation of seeker churches,” and that seeker churches “tend to treat tradition with disdain while embracing popular culture” thus undermining both “church history and the printed word.” In Sargeant’s Master of Arts Thesis at the same University he took issue with the way in which seeker churches have embraced “a therapeutic and expressive understanding of faith.” The result of this, in his view, is that in deferring to the religious consumer seeker churches make three mistakes. First, they “tend to place greater emphasis on the importance of experience, rather than propositional statements about truth. . . .” Second, they also tend to be part of a “shift in the locus of religious authority from the institution to the individual consumer” making the message more subjective and the audience, not the message, sovereign. Third, they place a heavy emphasis on the sociological aspects of church management rather than Biblical church leadership.

<sup>3</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 13. Os Guinness commends the seeker church for its commitment to the renewal of the local church through mission as seen in Chapter One of this thesis. Nevertheless, Guinness also believes that the renewal of mission takes one of two forms--either an emphasis on sociological knowledge, as with the church growth movement, or an emphasis on charismatic renewal.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. “The devilry of modernity has its own magic . . . (he) who supps with it will find his spoon getting shorter and shorter--until that last supper in which he is left alone at the table, with no spoon at all and with an empty plate.” (Peter L. Berger “A Rumor of Angels”, New York: Anchor, 1990. p 24-25).

<sup>5</sup> Os Guinness and John Seel, eds., *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 169. Some seeker church leaders would say that the church is becoming its own most effective gravedigger through its lack of relevance.

<sup>6</sup> See works in the Bibliography by authors critical of the seeker church movement in this and other areas. For instance, Norman Anderson, John Armstrong, Marva Dawn, Douglas Groothuis, Os Guinness, Michael Horton, Bill Hull, Donald McCullough, John MacArthur, Kenneth Myers, Greg Pritchard, Kimon Howland Sargeant, Douglas Webster, David Wells, Robert Wenz, William Willimon and others.

<sup>7</sup> John Seel, “Modernity and Evangelicals: American Evangelicalism as a Global Case Study,” in *Faith and Modernity*, Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, et al. (Oxford: Regnum Lynx, 1994), 308.

<sup>8</sup> Sampson, Samuel, et al., *Faith and Modernity*, 322-23.

*Come on, the guard said, I wasn't born yesterday. Tip it out.  
And out it came nothing but sawdust and shavings. So he was allowed to put it all back again and go home.  
The same thing happened every night all week, and the guard was getting extremely frustrated. Finally, his curiosity overcome his frustration.  
Petrovich, he said, I know you. Tell me what you're smuggling out of here, and I'll let you go.  
Wheelbarrows, my friend, said Petrovich. Wheelbarrows.*

Many critics see the influence of the culture on the church being accelerated by the drive for cultural relevance in seeker churches. In this chapter we will look at the culture of modernity and worldliness and examine how this results in influences, such as pragmatism, that can undermine the health of seeker churches.

## How Does Culture And Modernity Affect the Church?

Culture has given rise to modernization and secularization, which in turn produce the philosophies of life known as modernity and secularism. David Wells says that whereas secularization and modernization are external and sociological, secularism and modernity are their internal and ideological equivalents.<sup>9</sup> Where secularization and modernization involve the processes that have resulted in modern living, secularism and modernity are the terms used to describe the philosophy of life that now seems to validate the modern world and affirm its values.<sup>10</sup> David Wells observes, "Modernization is the process that requires that our society be organized around cities for the purpose of manufacturing and commerce. It is, therefore, a process driven by capitalism and fueled by technological innovation. These forces have reshaped our social landscape and, in turn, have reshaped our inner lives as we have been drawn into the vortex they have created. And it is this vortex that I am calling modernity."<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Oden gives a historical perspective and a devastating critique of modernity in his chapter "On Not Whoring After The Spirit Of The Age" in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*. Likening his definition to the three rings in a bulls-eye he says:

*The outer, more general circle of modernity refers to the overarching intellectual ideology of a historical period whose influence has lasted from 1789 to 1989--the fall of the Bastille to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The second, intermediate circle of our target defines modernity more tightly as a mentality that is found especially among certain intellectual elites. They assume that chronologically recent ways of knowing the truth are self-evidently superior to all premodern alternatives . . .  
The inner circle, or bull's-eye of our target, is modernity in the sense of a later-stage deterioration of both the preceding viewpoints. This deterioration has accelerated generally over the last half century but has reached a dramatic moment of precipitous moral decline in the last three decades.<sup>12</sup>*

He goes on to point out that four values characterize modernity--moral relativism, autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism. With his characteristic brilliance at analyzing the intersection of faith and culture, Lesslie Newbigin describes the result of the global dominance of the modern scientific worldview:

*. . . "Facts," as our culture understands them, are interpretations of our experience in terms of the questions "What?" and "How?" without asking the question "Why?" And facts are the material of our public, shared culture, the culture into which we expect every child to be inducted through the system of public education. That human nature is governed by the program encoded in the DNA molecule is a fact which every child is expected to understand and accept. It will be part of the school curriculum. That human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever is not a fact. It is an opinion held by some people. It belongs to the private sector, not the public. Those who hold it are free to communicate it to their children in home and church; it has no place in the curriculum of the public schools and universities. And since the publicly accepted definition of a human being excludes any statement of the purpose for which human beings exist, it follows necessarily that (in the ordinary meaning of the word "fact"), no factual statement can be made about what kinds of behavior are good or bad. These can only be private opinions. Pluralism reigns . . .  
. . . The end result is not--as we imagined twenty-five years ago--a secular society, a society which has no public beliefs but is a kind of neutral world in which we can all freely pursue our self-chosen purposes. We see that now for the mirage that it was. What we have is, as Gladstone foretold, a pagan society whose public life is ruled by beliefs which are false. And because it is not pre-Christian paganism, but a paganism born out of the rejection of Christianity, it is far tougher and more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganisms with*

<sup>9</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 78-80. Ken Myers also points out that whereas modernization refers to the "unintentional result of social arrangements which differ sharply from those found in traditional societies" modernity refers to those attitudes assumed mostly unconsciously that affirm those changes (*All God's Children*, 57-58).

<sup>10</sup> The English word "secular" comes from a Latin word, "saeculum," which means "this present age." The term "modern" comes from the Latin, *modo*, meaning "just now." Secularism and modernity are influences that cause people to focus on "this present age" and "the here and now," rooted in the material and temporal at the expense of the spiritual and eternal.

<sup>11</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 192-193.

*which foreign missionaries have been in contact during the past 200 years. Here, without possibility of question, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.*<sup>13</sup>

Because of the possibilities it seems to offer, modernity drives us to control, efficiency, predictability, calculation, productivity, and technology. Neil Postman lists several effects of modernity including, “that the primary, if not the only, goal of human labor and thought is efficiency; that technical calculation is in all respects superior to human judgment; that in fact human judgment cannot be trusted . . . that what cannot be measured either does not exist or is of no value; and that the affairs of citizens are best guided and conducted by experts.”<sup>14</sup> Guinness argues that we now, “idolize modern approaches to life, such as politics, management, marketing, and psychology; we also have fallen prey to powerful modern myths, such as change, technique, relevance, and need.”<sup>15</sup> John Seel says, “Reality is reduced to what is new, instant, controllable, measurable, predictable, and marketable. What fails to fit the grid of modernity is no longer perceived to be real, and is soon abandoned. What is lost, in fact, are those aspects of reality most precious to the followers of Christ—the intangible aspects of the spirit and the soul. Modernity is a corrosive acid to the reality of God’s transcendence and the deepest longings of humanness.”<sup>16</sup> Os Guinness describes it as the “acid rain of the spirit.”<sup>17</sup>

However harmless “culture” itself may seem, most authors point out that the culture now called modernity is an insidious threat to the church and the kingdom of God. David Wells describes it as “world cliche culture.”<sup>18</sup> Os Guinness describe it as follows: “Modernity is the central fact of human life today: Modernity is the first truly global culture in the world and the most powerful culture in history so far. Thus the empire of modernity is the great alternative to the kingdom of God. Extensively, it encircles the planet; intensively, it encompasses more and more of each individual’s life. . . . Modernity is double-edged for followers of Christ: . . . it is the greatest single opportunity and the greatest single challenge the church has faced since the apostles.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Wells calls modernity the “worldliness of Our Time”:

*Modernity presents an interlocking system of values that has invaded and settled within the psyche of every person. Modernity is simply unprecedented in its power to remake human appetites, thinking processes, and values. It is, to put it in biblical terms, the worldliness of Our Time. For worldliness is that system of values and beliefs, behaviors and expectations, in any given culture that have at their center the fallen human being and that relegate to their periphery any thought about God. Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd. Modernity is worldliness . . .*<sup>20</sup>

Wells warns, “The Christian mind in the midst of modernity is like the proverbial frog in the pot beneath which a fire has been kindled.”<sup>21</sup>

The mindset caught up in modernity moves away from the transcendent and spiritual to the immediate and material and is “centered above all on the premise that the ‘bottom up’ causation of human designs and products has now decisively replaced the ‘top down’ causation of God and the supernatural.”<sup>22</sup> Modernity rejects “appeals to revelation and tradition as sources of authority, except in so far as they could justify themselves before the bar of individual reason and conscience.”<sup>23</sup> In his book, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*, Donald McCullough laments that modernity has infected the church and caused what he calls a “loss of awe”:

*But the consequence, intended or not, has been a crowding out of the mysterious in favor of the factual, a flattening of transcendence into the measurable data of immanence, a forced retirement of God to a benign but wholly unnecessary corner of the universe. . . .  
 . . . In place of God, we now have control and explanation. Scientific investigation requires control of relevant variables (often in laboratory*

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<sup>13</sup> Newbigin, “Can The West Be Converted?” 2-7.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 51. Postman suggests that if we want to resist cultural forces and reach out more effectively to persons caught in contemporary culture we need to be people 1) who refuse to accept efficiency as the pre-eminent goal of human relations; 2) who have freed themselves from the belief in the magical powers of numbers; 3) who are, at least, suspicious of the idea of progress, and who do not confuse information with understanding; 4) who do not regard the aged as irrelevant; 5) who take the great narratives of religion seriously and 6) who know the difference between the sacred and the profane and who do not wink at tradition for modernity’s sake (p.184).

<sup>15</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 23. Guinness would include among the forces of development capitalism, industrialized technology, and telecommunications (*Dining with the Devil*, 16).

<sup>16</sup> Seel, “Modernity and Evangelicals” in *Faith and Modernity*, 295-296.

<sup>17</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 162.

<sup>19</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, “Truth and Authority in Modernity,” in *Faith and Modernity*, Sampson, Samuel, et al., (Oxford: Regnum Lynx, 1994), 60-88.

settings) in order to test the reliability of theories. When results can be repeated with predictable regularity, theories graduate into laws. And explanation, in turn, supplies the knowledge for further control, and on it goes, as our mastery increases and God seems less and less necessary. . . .

*Get control, we believe, and explanations will emerge.*

*Because we do not easily escape the thought-patterns of our culture, this ethos of control and explanation may very well influence our view of God, tempting us to choose for ourselves a controllable god, a god who will not threaten our growing sense of mastery over the world.<sup>24</sup>*

Os Guinness says “The two most easily recognizable hallmarks of secularization in America are the exaltation of numbers and of technique. Both are prominent in the megachurch movement at a popular level. In its fascination with statistics and data at the expense of truth, this movement is characteristically modern.”<sup>25</sup> Guinness asks:

*Are there not similar dangers when a numbers-hungry church mimics the high-control calculus of modern commercial enterprises? “Totally planned, professionally orchestrated, single-purpose environments” may be as “effective” for evangelism in megachurches as they are for selling in megamalls. But when everything is controlled, from first impressions in the parking lot to the wardrobe colors and stage movements of the platform party, who controls the church and who controls the controllers? Something of the mysterious and lovable but unwashed reality of the real-life bride of Christ is lost. Something of the impossible-to-predict, category-shattering sovereignty and grace of God is walled off.<sup>26</sup>*

Joseph Stowell observes its effects on the world of pastoral ministry; “We as shepherds are inundated with the pressure to construct our ministries according to *forms* that offer stunning opportunity for growth, that keep us at the leading edge of our profession, that prevent us from feeling and appearing old and stodgy, and that reflect well on our own glory.”<sup>27</sup> All of these concerns require us to examine how, if at all, the culture of modernity has affected the seeker church.

### **Do Seeker Churches Have An Adequate View of Culture and Modernity?**

Most critics believe that seeker churches have a naive view of culture—they seem to assume the surrounding culture is neutral territory on which to engage the seeker. Wells says, “. . . All too often evangelicals have come to view modernity as value-neutral. They have co-opted the techniques that have made the modern world flourish and put them to work in the evangelical world in hopes of making it flourish.”<sup>28</sup> The critics believe that the uncritical adoption of the idea of cultural relevance causes seeker churches to embrace and (unintentionally) affirm the surrounding culture. Greg Pritchard speaks on behalf of many when he says, “Hybels understanding of relevance, by definition, affirms the surrounding culture. This is a problem and is compounded by Hybels commitment to identify with unchurched Harry, moving as close to him as possible. When one starts with Harry’s language categories, priorities, and felt needs, it becomes very difficult to be critical of the culture. This process has profound consequences for Willow Creek. Willow Creek accommodates the culture in its theological message and adopts much of the American psychological worldview.”<sup>29</sup> Pritchard warns, “. . . All of the weaknesses in Willow Creek’s strategy have one root cause: Hybels and his team have not thoroughly evaluated the American culture from a Christian perspective.”<sup>30</sup>

Possibly the strongest critic of modern pop culture is Kenneth Myers. In his book *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* he argues that modern evangelicals, in the name of cultural relevance, have identified totally with modern culture—unaware that it is a culture of diversion, novelty, and instant gratification.

*. . . the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for the modern Christian as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries . . . the erosion of character, the spoiling of innocent pleasures, and the cheapening of life itself that accompany modern popular culture can occur so subtly that we believe nothing has happened.*

*. . . its triviality while making it seem innocuous, also enables it to be extremely pervasive and that is its most toxic quality. It unobtrusively provides the backdrop, scenery, costumes, minor characters script and background noise of much of our lives. When we arrive, the stage is already set, the lyrics and music written, our lines and our movements already determined. Popular culture has the power to set the pace, the agenda, and the priorities for much of our social and our spiritual existence, without our explicit consent. It requires a great effort not to be*

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<sup>24</sup> Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1995), 17-18.

<sup>25</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Stowell, *Shepherding The Church*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 296.

<sup>29</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 223.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

*mastered by it.*

*... Popular culture was not simply influenced by, but was created by the same forces that resulted in modernity.<sup>31</sup>*

Although many helpful insights can be gleaned from the critics, most of them, like Myers, seem to contrast the best of high culture of the past with the worst of popular culture today. They almost imply that high culture was the source of today's values--yet today's high culture can be just as decadent. This caused one reviewer of several works critical of seeker churches to ask, "... why is our culture being singled out for thorough and total condemnation? Why is contemporary culture so fundamentally different from previous generations or any other culture?"<sup>32</sup>

Other evangelicals who have wrestled with this issue clearly see the innocence and evil in culture as do seeker church leaders. The Lausanne Committee discussed the Biblical basis for culture in the Willowbank Report and summarized it thus: "Because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic."<sup>33</sup> The Willowbank Report, in addressing culture as a missionary problem, throws light on the issue for the seeker church:

*At the same time, there are features of every culture which are not incompatible with the lordship of Christ, and which therefore need not be threatened or discarded, but rather preserved and transformed. Messengers of the gospel need to develop a deep understanding of the local culture, and a genuine appreciation of it. Only then will they be able to perceive whether the resistance is to some unavoidable challenge of Jesus Christ or to some threat to the culture which, whether imaginary or real, is not necessary. . .*

*The other problem is that the gospel is often presented to people in alien cultural forms. Then the missionaries are resented and their message rejected because their own customs and way of life. Where missionaries bring with them foreign ways of thinking and behaving, or attitudes of radical superiority, paternalism or preoccupation with material things, effective communication will be precluded.*

*Sometimes these two cultural blunders are committed together and messengers of the gospel are guilty of a cultural imperialism which both undermines the local culture unnecessarily and seeks to impose an alien culture instead.<sup>34</sup>*

Seeker churches do need the reminder to relate to the culture when they can and redeem the individuals caught up in the sinful aspects of the culture. But many critics assume that seeker church leaders think that cultural relevance in ministry necessarily means adapting *the message* to the cultural values of the unchurched. Despite the claims of the critics that seeker churches view culture as totally innocent, Bill Hybels leaves no question as to his views. In an interview with *Christianity Today* he said, "I think the values of our society are blatantly opposed to the values of Christ. But what we are trying to do at Willow Creek is say, "Come as you are. Come with your BMW and your Rolex, because even though you have caved in to the values of this sick culture, you still matter to God." And when they confess their sins and see what Christ did for them at the cross, we begin a very aggressive value-transformation program that will not stop until they go to their graves."<sup>35</sup>

### **Is The 'Traffic on the Bridge' to the World All Moving In One Direction?**

Cultural relevance is a two-way street; or as William Willimon says we have built our bridges to the world but the traffic is moving in our direction: "There was a time when I would have agreed this was one of the primary purposes of Christian preaching--to relate the gospel to contemporary culture. However, I have come to believe that is our weakness rather than our strength. In leaning over to speak to the modern world, I fear we may have fallen in. When we sought to use our sermons to build a bridge from the old world of the Bible to the new, modern world, the traffic was moving only in one direction on that bridge."<sup>36</sup> These concerns begin to sound very similar to what our evangelical forefathers talked about when they warned us to avoid "worldliness." But Michael Horton warns that worldliness is not so much about what we do in the world but what we let the world do to us:

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<sup>31</sup> Myers, *All God's Children*, xii-xiii, xiii-xiv, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Redman, Jr., "Friendly Fire: Evangelical Critics Take Aim At Contemporary Worship," *Worship Leader* 4, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 1995): 35. On the issue of culture Kenneth Myers arguments in particular are somewhat flawed. He often uses the worst example of contemporary or pop culture and the best examples of traditional or high culture. At times he seems to be arguing that his personal preference for high culture is an objective and safe standard whereas anyone who likes what some of popular culture offers has been duped! As someone who likes some of the offerings of high culture and pop culture but is cautious of both I don't know what category I fall into! The main reason high culture may have a greater moral quality is because it was more influenced by a Christian worldview not because it is intrinsically better or more moral. Popular culture has not had the same privilege. So do we use high culture because of its second hand effect or go directly to the source of its moral value and address today's culture with the gospel.

<sup>33</sup> "The Willowbank Report--Gospel and Culture," (Unpublished Papers presented at Conference at Willowbank, Somerset Bridge, Bermuda 6th-13th January, 1978), in *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 2, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization* (Photocopied Pages), 5.

<sup>34</sup> "Willowbank Report," 14.

<sup>35</sup> Hybels, "Selling Out the House of God?" 24.

<sup>36</sup> William H. Willimon, "This Culture is Overrated: Why It's Dangerous to Want to Relate the Gospel to the Modern World," *Leadership* 18 (Winter 1997): 29.

*Worldly activity is not only sanctioned by God, but commanded. But worldliness is the disease of the soul that infects us when we begin to pattern our ideas, beliefs, methods, and lifestyles according to the world. Many of us grew up in churches where this “worldliness” was associated with secular callings, financial success, and dancing, drinking, smoking, or hanging around people and places where these activities took place. This is not—emphatically, not—the worldliness described by Scripture. We become worldly when “Phil Donahue” pep talks replace sermons, worship is transformed for market-driven consumerism, and therapeutic or political categories begin to replace the solid biblical emphasis in our churches. We become worldly when obsessions with “practical” issues replace well-informed discipleship and when we begin to think that visible popularity and numerical success are the measures of ministry.<sup>37</sup>*

Unthoughtful attempts at cultural relevance are counter-productive; in fact, they are a symptom of this worldliness and they exacerbate it. John MacArthur describes worldliness as “the love God hates” and criticizes the seeker church movement because it brings the world—unchanged—into the church. “Merely ‘churching’ the unchurched accomplishes nothing of eternal value. Too often, however, that is where the strategy stalls . . . Multitudes who are not authentic Christians now identify themselves with the church. The church has thus been invaded with the world’s values, the world’s interests, and the world’s citizens.”<sup>38</sup>

William Willimon also makes the point that Christianity is its own culture and the seeker needs to be introduced to that. It may take time, but to introduce him to anything less is to change the culture of the church unnecessarily and to leave the culture of the seeker unchanged:

*. . . Christianity is a culture. You cannot learn to speak French by reading a French novel in an English translation—you must sit for the grammar, the syntax, and the vocabulary, and learn it. So you cannot know Christianity by having it translated into some other medium like Marxism, feminism, or the language of self-esteem. Christianity is a distinct culture with its own vocabulary, grammar and practices.*

*Rather than reaching out to speak to our culture, our time as preachers is better spent inculturating modern, late-twentieth-century Americans into that culture called church. When I walk into a class on Introductory Physics, I expect not to understand immediately most of the vocabulary, terminology, and concepts. Why should it be any different for modern Americans walking into a church?*

*This is why the concept of “user-friendly churches” often leads to churches getting used. There is not way I can crank the gospel down to the level where any American can walk in off the street and know what it is all about within fifteen minutes. One can’t do that even with baseball! You have to learn the vocabulary, the rules, and the culture in order to understand it. Being in church is something at least as different as being in a baseball stadium.*

*The point is not to speak to the culture. The point is to change it. God’s appointed means of producing change is called “church”; and God’s typical way of producing church is called “preaching.”<sup>39</sup>*

Seeker church leaders ought to examine carefully whether their strategy follows through into the establishment of fully devoted followers of Christ. If these criticisms hold true, the strategy needs to be changed. Wisdom and discernment are needed to know the cause of the worldliness that seems to be invading the church. Is it the result of a fresh influx of newly converted believers, who are just beginning to mature? Or is it the result of attempts at cultural relevance that compromise the Biblical purity of the church? For many seeker churches it is the former; for some it is the latter. In response to Willimon’s assertion that the seeker needs to be introduced to the culture of the church, seeker church leaders would rather introduce the seeker to a *Biblical sub-culture* than a *sub-Biblical culture*.<sup>40</sup>

## **Do Seeker Churches Use Entertainment as a Means or an End?**

In aspiring to cultural relevance in an entertainment-saturated culture it is little surprise that the seeker church might be accused of offering entertainment instead of providing the whole counsel of God. Os Guinness’ charge that the megachurch has relegated worship and discipleship to evangelism carried with it the observation that all three have been subordinated to entertainment.<sup>41</sup> MacArthur views seeker services as an attempt to charm and disarm, “. . . Better to charm people first, then slip the gospel in subtly. Churches that have bought this misguided philosophy believe they must provide entertainment and good feelings rather than profound truth and deep experiences of worship, prayer, and conviction.”<sup>42</sup> Douglas Groothuis warns that any approach that seems like entertainment will dishonor “the gravity, depth, and substance

<sup>37</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *Where in the World is the Church?: A Christian View of Culture and Your Role in It* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 179.

<sup>38</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 103.

<sup>39</sup> Willimon, “This Culture is Overrated,” 29-31.

<sup>40</sup> For a definition and discussion of the terms *Biblical sub-culture* and *sub-Biblical culture* see Chapter 2.

<sup>41</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 148.

of biblical truth . . . .”<sup>43</sup> It is a difficult for those using entertainment to avoid the temptation to present Christianity as something different than it actually is.<sup>44</sup>

While some seeker services may be no more than “entertainment,” true worship and the gospel can also be “riveting.” Most believers I know react like seekers when teaching and worship become “riveting”--they want to come back for more. If we can grab and hold their attention with the truth and grace of the gospel we should. John MacArthur himself acknowledged this when asked by an interviewer what was the difference between maintaining interest (through a well-crafted message and well-chosen illustrations) and being merely entertaining. He responded that if it was rightly motivated for the purpose of communicating spiritual truth with a view to transformation then it was legitimate.<sup>45</sup> Thus, entertainment as a means and entertainment as an end are two very different things. Rick Warren makes the point that Jesus spoke to the crowds with an interesting style, “If you look up the word *entertain* in a dictionary, you’ll find this definition: ‘capturing and holding the attention for an extended period of time.’ I don’t know any preacher who doesn’t want to do that. We should not be afraid of being interesting. A sermon does not have to be dry to be spiritual.”<sup>46</sup> In an extensive interview with Christianity Today Bill Hybels defends the Willow Creek position. After being asked to reply to the charge that Willow Creek entertained, he replied:

*The word entertainment, of course, is emotive by its nature. And yes, we do use drama, contemporary Christian music, and multi-media presentations. But they are never used for the sake of titillation. I think it’s good to ask: Who was the master composer? Who created the arts? Whose idea was it to communicate the truth through a wide variety of artistic genres? I think it was God.*

*Then why has the church narrowed its options and selected a talking head as its only form on communicating the most important message on the planet? Even though preaching is the primary way the truth of God has been and should be communicated, we add texture and feeling and perspective to it through the use of music and media and drama. And anyone who has witnessed our presentations would never use the words “mere entertainment.”*

*Those criticisms tend to be leveled by those who do not understand or who have never experienced Spirit-anointed drama, multi-media, and contemporary Christian music.*<sup>47</sup>

Similarly with Dieter Zander when asked by Sally Morgenthaler: “Do you think evangelism in a public church setting must be done through entertainment?”

*I believe that churches using seeker services are not trying to entertain so much as they are trying to create a credibility that will get the attention of the seeking boomer . . . For the buster, it’s more like “Is this real, attractive, and relevant?” Busters don’t want to be entertained, but neither do they want to be bored. Somewhere in the middle is what’s going to be compelling for them. Entertainment? No one can go up against MTV and the concerts they go to. You just can’t, so in a sense, the church shouldn’t even try.”*<sup>48</sup>

The critics often imply that anything done in church must be solemn, somber and serious to be acceptable to God! The authentic communication of the gospel in a seeker service can be both serious, often joyful and yes, even at times entertaining. Speaking of seeker churches MacArthur dogmatically states “their desire for a pleasing, attractive message is utterly incompatible with the true gospel.”<sup>49</sup> However, making the Gospel attractive is an idea enjoined upon us by those very words in Scripture itself (Titus 2:9-10). There may be controversy about the method we choose but let us at least agree it is not an anti-Biblical concept.

## Do Seeker Churches Understand The History They Are Abandoning?

Some see all of this preoccupation with the power of modern methods and means resulting in a consequent rejection of time-honored traditions. Guinness suggests how modernity wins its battles through four steps toward compromise:

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<sup>43</sup> Mittelberg and Groothuis, “The Seeker Church Movement,” 55.

<sup>44</sup> In a major compilation of Christian authors on the subject of modernity, the issue of “entertainment” and the Christian faith being “presented as more successful and entertaining than the Christian life is in everyday life” was referred to in a list of challenges facing the church. Among other problems facing the church in a media age were: Irrelevance, Awareness, Appetizers of faith rather than the whole Gospel, Personal engagement and experience superseding official doctrine, Untraditional views and radical opinions gaining preference, Questions and doubt having more room than answers and faith, Experiential faith of individuals being in focus at the expense of more collective and sacramental aspects of faith, Happy testimonies from those who have “made it” will easily supersede faith as struggle and suffering, Well-known personalities will come to the front more than the established Christian leadership, The love of God will overshadow the wrath of God.(Sampson 1994: 282-83).

<sup>45</sup> John MacArthur, “Our Sufficiency for Outreach,” 134-139. This actually sounds very pragmatic!

<sup>46</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 231. The Oxford English Dictionary actually defines ‘Entertain’ as: “to use the creative arts to provide an interesting, agreeable or amusing experience for an audience.”

<sup>47</sup> Hybels, “Selling Out the House of God?” 23.

<sup>48</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 206-207.

<sup>49</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 134.

... Some aspect of modern life or thought is entertained not only as significant, and therefore worth acknowledging, but as superior to what Christians now know or do, and therefore worth assuming as true. . . . Something modern is assumed (step one). As a consequence, something traditional is abandoned (step two), and everything else is adapted (step three). At the end of the line, Christian assumptions are absorbed by the modern ones. The gospel has been assimilated to the shape of culture, often without a remainder.<sup>50</sup>

Modernity demands the new and wants it now! Guinness calls this “contemporary conceit.”<sup>51</sup> Concerned that in evangelicalism the criterion for truth is no longer Biblical, Thomas Oden laments that now, under modernity’s influence, “. . . Novelty has become a criterion for truth. . . our culture errs in the direction of the idolatry of the new.”<sup>52</sup> As Guinness also points out, “. . . Nothing is more characteristically modern than a repudiation of the past.”<sup>53</sup> Kenneth Myers, citing C. S. Lewis, points out that this tendency is seen when what was once called permanence is now labeled stagnation:

*“How has it come about,” C. S. Lewis once asked “that we use the highly emotive word “stagnation,” with all its malodorous and malarial overtones, for what other ages would have called “permanence”? It is, Lewis suggests because the dominance of the machine in our culture altered our imagination. It gave us a “new archetypal image. It is the image of old machines being superseded by new and better ones. For in the world of machines the new most often really is better and the primitive really is the clumsy. And this image, potent in all our minds, reigns almost without rival in the minds of the uneducated. For to them, after their marriage and the births of their children, the very milestones of life are technical advances. From the old push-bike and thence to the little car; from gramophone to radio and from radio to television; from the range to the stove; these are the very stages of their pilgrimage.”<sup>54</sup>*

But before we embrace the new we have to ask what it is that we are abandoning? And has our abandonment itself become an unwitting compromise?

*G. K. Chesterton reminds us of the difference between constructive and destructive change, between wise reform and impatient radicalism. The impatient radical, Chesterton says, sweeps things away without a single thought: “I don’t see the use of it. Clear it away!” The wise reformer, on the other hand says, “If you don’t see the use of it, I won’t let you clear it away. Only when you come back and say you do see the use of it, will I allow you to clear it away.”<sup>55</sup>*

Guinness suggests the third step toward compromise is adaptation; practically speaking many seeker church leaders face this tension every week; cultural relevance by its very definition involves adaptation. Critics would say the seeker church has gone too far in abandoning history for the sake of the seeker. Kent Hughes observes: “. . . there is often such a strained attempt to be ‘relevant’ that anything that has not come out of the last 20 years is consciously avoided. The great hymns of the church are shelved. A reverse elitism is instilled which is proudly cast. The end effect of this approach is to produce the unfortunate illusion that the evangelical church has come out of nowhere-without heritage or roots!”<sup>56</sup>

Seeker church leaders have to ask themselves honestly if they embrace the new because it is new and unwittingly abandon tradition because it is from the past? Willow Creek makes the point that, “Seeker churches are not anti-tradition, but they do strive to keep tradition in perspective. The question that should be asked is whether each tradition or practice is optimally serving the biblical purpose for which it was originally designed. If it is, keep it! If it’s not, and if the Scriptures give us leeway on how to accomplish that purpose, then let’s find a better way!”<sup>57</sup> However, this response does not address the very real tensions between cultural relevance and Biblical purity that seeker church ministry raise. For instance, although there may be great benefit to speaking in ways today’s unchurched person can understand, nevertheless an enormous legacy of Christian thought and example may be put off limits unintentionally by a seeker approach to ministry. The average seeker church pastor over time finds it increasingly difficult to introduce examples, concepts and ideas that previous generations of Christians may have fought and died for. Where is the place for an appropriate sense of church history and of informing the Christian mind with the issues preoccupying Augustine, Luther and Calvin? Where is the place for informing and inspiring the Christian with the example of a David Livingstone, a Hudson Taylor, or a Jim Elliott? When cultural relevance is valued, these characters are displaced by illustrations from television, movies, and the entertainment industry. Whenever something new is emphasized something old is neglected; the critics of the seeker

<sup>50</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 56-57.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>52</sup> “On Not Whoring After The Spirit Of The Age” by Thomas C. Oden in Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 202.

<sup>53</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 80.

<sup>54</sup> Myers, *All God’s Children*, 65-66, citing C. S. Lewis, “De Descriptione Temporum,” in *They Asked for a Paper: Papers and Addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 21.

<sup>55</sup> Guinness, *Dining With the Devil*, 83. Here Guinness quotes G. K. Chesterton from “The Drift from Domesticity,” in Robert Knille ed., *As I Was Saying: A Chesterton Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 127.

<sup>56</sup> Stowell, *Shepherding the Church*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> “Myths About a Movement,” 6.

church movement force us to ask careful questions about what is being neglected and to realize that relevance is indeed a double-edged sword.

Seeker churches also need to take to heart warnings about the replacement of historically meaningful aspects of the traditions of the church. The identity of some seeker churches is wrapped up in the pride of being on the cutting edge. But often their novelty replaces the meaningful permanence of the old before deep thought has been given as to what has been assumed, abandoned, adapted and assimilated. Driving south from Charlotte, North Carolina, on the main Interstate is a sign for Belmont College that reads “Put a century of tradition behind you.” Such a sign over the church reminds us that some traditions of the church have much to offer--put them behind you to build on them; some traditions of the church are a hindrance--leave behind the programs of yesterday’s leaders. Os Guinness wisely reminds us that those who “treat their ancestors as fools are likely only to demonstrate that the heritage is alive and well.”<sup>58</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan’s words, shared in brief in the first chapter, apply fully to the issue under discussion: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering we are where and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition.”<sup>59</sup>

### Are Seeker Churches Repeating the Drift of Liberalism?

Several critics see the emphasis on cultural relevance in the seeker church movement repeating the errors of the liberal movement of the end of the last century, only with a different flavor.<sup>60</sup> The motto of the World Council of Churches became, “The world sets the agenda for the church.” Now many see the seeker church movement sailing in the same dangerous waters. Bill Hull parallels the drift into compromise as being rooted in the perception of an “irrelevant message” problem:

*If we swallow the line of thinking that denigrates theology, we fall into the same trap liberal ministers fell into when they mistakenly identified their ineffectiveness in reaching people as an irrelevant-message problem. So they changed their message to one of compassion without moral requirements or absolutes dealing with reconciliation to God. Their new stance came to be known as the “social gospel.” While a great need for compassion and meeting social needs exists, that is not a person’s deepest need. Therefore, liberals found themselves in a subjective world, a needs-on-demand society with no real, objective basis on which to make decisions. They lost their message . . .*

*Contemporary evangelicalism is on the same slippery slope. It is in danger of becoming so identified with its culture that it is losing its soul.*<sup>61</sup>

David Wells also sees the danger to evangelicals coming not as a deliberate theological agenda but as a by-product of contemporary culture, “what theological modernism failed to accomplish, modernization is now bringing to fruition.”<sup>62</sup> The drift into liberal modernism came about because liberals *changed* theology, whereas the drift today is happening because evangelicals (at least at this point in time) *ignore* it;

*Now evangelicals have picked up the banner of cultural relevance and, like a bunch of fools, are about to repeat the liberals’ folly. The very folly we scorned, preached against, and wondered how anyone could so stupidly accept—this is the folly we are adopting.*

*The liberals’ folly was to change theology, the evangelicals’ folly is to ignore it. Evangelicals will not change theology; that’s what makes us evangelical. Rather, we use it as a security blanket as we launch out onto the ever-changing sea of culture, seeking the new world of relevance (my emphasis).*<sup>63</sup>

David Wells tracks the demise of this liberalism and draws parallels for the contemporary church:

*If there is a lesson to be learned from the demise of Liberalism, Leonard Sweet has argued, it is at this point. The constant minimalizing of what faith meant, the reductions and modifications aimed at meeting the demands of the age, the slick shifting and moving to catch the prevailing cultural winds took away the ability of liberalism to speak to the most basic aspects of meaning. Soon, “a good church was not a believing church, but a working church, a church of constant to-ing and fro-ing, with lots of task forces and especially lots of committees.” The Church became a place to get things done, and its fidelity came to be measured by the activities it arranged. But these activities had less and*

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<sup>58</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 83.

<sup>59</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan in an interview in *U.S. News & World Report* (June 26, 1989) reported in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 13.

<sup>60</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*. “Most evangelicals today tend to equate the word ‘modernism’ with a full-scale denial of the faith. It is often forgotten that the aim of the early modernists was simply to make the church more ‘modern,’ more unified, more relevant, and more acceptable to a skeptical modern age. Just like the pragmatists today.” (p.xvi).

<sup>61</sup> Bill Hull, *Building High Commitment in a Low-Commitment World* (Grand Rapids, MI: F.H. Revell Co., 1995), 50-51.

<sup>62</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 178.

<sup>63</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 60.

*less to do with the love of God and more and more to do with the love of neighbor until in the end the one was subsumed under the other. And then this love for neighbor itself underwent further transformation so that faith came to mean little more than seeking justice in the world, and while that is a characteristically Christian concern, it is not distinctively Christian. The path that this earlier Liberalism followed is now, perhaps entirely unconsciously, being replicated in evangelicalism, especially where the culture of professionalization is stripping it of a functioning, transcendent reference point in the Word of God.<sup>64</sup>*

Exposing the slippery slope of ministry based on the idea of contemporary relevance, G. K. Chesterton chides, “A man who seriously describes his faith as Modernism might just as well invent a creed called Monday-ism, meaning that he puts special faith in the fancies that occurred to him on Monday; or a creed call Morningism; meaning that he believed in the thoughts that occurred to him in the morning and not in the afternoon.”<sup>65</sup>

The possibility of attempts at cultural relevance issuing in recycled liberalism ought to make the seeker church stop and think. This is a danger; however, it is an overstated one. As the critics themselves acknowledge, it is only when theology is ignored and cultural relevance is given priority over Biblical purity that such an error might occur. Seeker churches that maintain a high regard for theology will be protected from this danger. To the extent that a pragmatic methodology and not Biblical theology is the starting place and the driving force behind the movement a greater likelihood of such dangers exists.

### **Do Seeker Churches Let Pragmatic Methodology Replace Biblical Theology?**

David Wells argues that pragmatism results from modernity--the loss of the priority of truth results in the church settling for practice and method alone.<sup>66</sup> Again, it is another form of worldliness--the world offers a better agenda for the methodology and the methodology shapes the principles of the church.

#### ***Pragmatism Puts Growth Before God***

Do seeker churches put the growth of the church before God? This question must be asked because of the subtle temptation to seek “growth for God” and to seek “God for growth.” The primary goal should not be to get churches filled with people but people filled with God; when the people are filled with God, the churches will be filled with people. Sally Morgenthaler asks “. . . is God our goal in the ‘90’s? Or have we replaced God with growth? Are we doing what we’re doing in our sanctuaries and worship centers so that, like Paul, we may “know Christ,” or do we just want to draw bigger crowds? We may need to do a “motivation-check.”<sup>67</sup> If our growth is to be more than superficial, if it is to be God-pleasing and lasting, then God and the worship of God must come first. In the words of Bruce Leafblad, “God is the first priority of the church. Not people. Not ministry. Not growth. Not success. God and God alone occupies the place of ultimate and absolute priority in the church.”<sup>68</sup>

One pastor admitted that his prayers had become something like this, “God if you will put me first and give me the growth I want to see, I will put you first.” He sought God with a purer heart when he realized how close to idolatry this sounded. Many pastors visit Willow Creek, Saddleback, and other flagship seeker churches to learn from the ministry methods. What can often become the unintentional goal is similar ministry success. God’s role in the life of the church then becomes one of being used as support for whatever success and numerical goals the church aspires to. I recently met a staff member of a seeker church who proudly trumpeted she was in charge of getting 2,000 people to the church by the year 2,000--that was her sole job description. Let us just suppose that this church reaches its goal, to what will they ascribe their success? My guess is they will start seminars suggesting the key to growth is appointing a staff member in charge of getting a certain number of people in the door. When such pragmatic goals and methods become the driving force of the church spiritual realities take a secondary place, as does the centrality of God and Scripture.

Rick Warren acknowledges, “Every church is driven by something. There is a guiding force, a controlling assumption, a directing conviction behind everything that happens. It may be unspoken. It may be unknown to many. Most likely it has never been officially voted on. But it is there, influencing every aspect of the church’s life.”<sup>69</sup> For some in the seeker church movement, that “controlling assumption” has been “if we do this we will grow.” Warren rightly sees growth as being only one of the healthy Biblical purposes of the church but one that must be balanced by the other purposes of the church.

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<sup>64</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 253-254. Wells also argues that modernity results in the academy settling for reflection alone.

<sup>65</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 80. Quoting G. K. Chesterton, “The New Case for Catholic Schools,” in *Knille, As I Was Saying*, 178.

<sup>66</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 127.

<sup>67</sup> Morgenthaler, “Worship--The Real Thing,” 28.

<sup>68</sup> Bruce Leafblad, “Recovering the Priority of God: A Call to the Churches of America,” in *Worship Leader*, Apr-May, 1992, 19; quoted in Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 42.

<sup>69</sup> Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 77. Warren lists several such driving forces: tradition, personality, finances, programs, buildings, events, seekers.

### ***Pragmatism Puts Higher Priority On Methods That Work Than On Biblical Truth***

Pragmatism asks first what “works”—produces growth—before it asks what God wants the church to look like. It has a pre-occupation with ministry impact. Any consequent success puts the methods beyond analysis or question. Tozer talked about such a danger decades ago:

*The pragmatic philosophy . . . asks no embarrassing questions about the wisdom of what we are doing or even about the morality of it. It accepts our chosen ends as right and good and casts about for efficient means and ways to get them accomplished. When it discovers something that works it soon finds a text to justify it, “consecrates” it to the Lord and plunges ahead. Next a magazine article is written about it, then a book, and finally the inventor is granted an honorary degree. After that any question about the scripturalness of things or even the moral validity of them is completely swept away. You cannot argue with success. The method works ergo, it must be good.<sup>70</sup>*

Using megachurches to endorse the idea of cultural relevance needs to be done with caution. The size and apparent evangelistic effectiveness of the churches advocating it give it an additional appeal it might not otherwise have. Bill Hull wisely warns, “Because the megachurch has a tremendous gravitational pull, it threatens to pull many hungry pastors into the trap of cultural relevancy as the highest good.”<sup>71</sup> Pragmatic church leaders will have a hard time letting anything other than the megachurches set the agenda for the church. Unfortunately this will cause some churches to engage in tawdry impersonations and imitations of methodologies while displacing God’s will for their own church. Is it possible God has something to teach larger churches through smaller faithful churches? The answer is “yes,” and if so the important lessons—the ones we are to learn and pass on—cannot be all about size.

Do seeker churches emphasize their methods more than biblical principles? Often church leaders come away from visits to the megachurches in the seeker church movement with one overwhelming impression—the strategy works! They feel this because in a myriad of subtle ways, through conferences, seminars, books, impressions, images, and stories they are being told that the strategy does work—“the medium is the message.” Despite great efforts by the conference hosts to deny that the conference is focusing on a repeatable strategy, many go home fixated on the methods by which such a great church might be made possible for them too. As emphasis is placed on methods and strategies at the expense of Biblical principles, the foundational role of God and Scripture in the life of the church is displaced by the foundational role of the promising strategy. As eager conference attendees set out to build seeker churches using their new strategies for success, conflict and disillusionment are a common theme.

### ***Pragmatism Depends On Human Ingenuity To Achieve Spiritual Objectives***

Most critics warn that relevance can become a man-centered method with the temptation to focus on our efforts being decisive in winning people to Christ and causing growth. As Sally Morgenthaler says, “In this last decade of the twentieth century, many evangelicals have bought the line that says relevance is everything. The way you say it, play it, pray it, and display it will mean success or failure.”<sup>72</sup> In the words of the Cambridge Declaration: “Unwarranted confidence in human ability is a product of fallen human nature. This false confidence now fills the evangelical world from the self-esteem gospel to the health and wealth gospel, from those who have transformed the gospel into a product to be sold and sinners into consumers who want to buy to others who treat Christian faith as being true simply because it works.”<sup>73</sup> John MacArthur adds a similar warning: “Our sufficiency isn’t in our techniques, skills, or experiences. Our sufficiency is in Christ . . . Scripture is the only perfect blueprint for all true ministry, and those who build according to any other plan are erecting a structure that will be unacceptable to the Master Architect.”<sup>74</sup>

Where “success” eventually comes, along with it comes the temptation to think that it is the methods that are the key issue in being effective, that something other than the sovereignty of God and the power of the gospel is the effective means of salvation. We are in danger of believing it is our creativity and relevance that has caused spiritual birth. Whenever the gospel has been powerfully communicated, we fall prey to imagining the power lies in the image we have presented, the influence we have exerted and the method we have used. The better we get at presenting the image we want through the use of powerful and persuasive means (drama, media, etc.) more alert we have to be to dangers of living off the apparent success of the images we present.

This is a prevalent issue with seeker churches. As Biblical principles are relegated by the trust put in a strategy, the tendency among some seeker churches is to imagine that if the right music, drama, media and message can be combined,

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<sup>70</sup> A. W. Tozer in *God Tells the Man Who Waits* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Christian Publications, 1970), 70; as quoted by John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 81.

<sup>71</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 59.

<sup>72</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 138-139.

<sup>73</sup> “The Cambridge Declaration: Unpublished Pamphlet of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals Meeting at Cambridge, MA April 20, 1996” (1996), 6-7.

<sup>74</sup> John MacArthur, “Our Sufficiency for Outreach: An Interview with John MacArthur About His Controversial Book,” *Leadership* 12 (Fall 1991): 138.

“moments” are created that will convince the seeker to embrace God. Many, if asked about the state of the church, will speak more about the contemporary music, clever dramas, state-of-the-art facilities, and “cool” congregation than the power of the gospel. The focus becomes the ability to control and manage all the variables that we imagine would stop a seeker from coming to faith in Christ: “. . . (Pragmatism’s) underlying presuppositions are that the church can accomplish spiritual goals by fleshly means, and that the power of God’s Word alone is not sufficient to break through a sinner’s blindness and hardness of heart. . . . Many appear to believe that we can capture people for Christ and the church only if our programs are imaginative enough and our sermons are persuasive enough.”<sup>75</sup> James Packer’s *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, although written many years ago has some timely advice:

*. . . if we forget that it is God’s prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize. And this line of thought, consistently followed through, will lead us far astray.*

*Let us work this out. If we regarded it as our job, not simply to present Christ, but actually to produce converts—to evangelize, not only faithfully but also successfully—our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating. We should conclude that our basic equipment, both for personal dealing and for public preaching must be twofold. We must have, not merely a clear grasp of the meaning and application of the gospel, but also an irresistible technique for inducing a response. We should, therefore, make it our business to try and develop such a technique. And we should evaluate all evangelism, our own and other people’s, by the criterion, not only of the message preached, but also of visible results. If our own efforts were not bearing fruit, we should conclude that our technique still needed improving. If they were bearing fruit, we should conclude that this justified the technique we had been using. We should regard evangelism as an activity involving a battle of wills between ourselves and those to whom we go, a battle in which victory depends on our firing off a heavy enough barrage of calculated effects.<sup>76</sup>*

### ***Pragmatism Results In The Methods and Strategies Obscuring Spiritual Realities***

The worst effect of pragmatism is that faith in the supernatural resources of God—his Word, his Spirit, his people—is diminished. John MacArthur puts it this way, “Wherever pragmatism exists in the church, there is always a corresponding de-emphasis on Christ’s sufficiency, God’s sovereignty, biblical integrity, the power of prayer, and Spirit-led ministries. The result is a man-centered ministry that attempts to accomplish divine purposes by superficial programs and human methodology rather than by the Word or the power of the Spirit.”<sup>77</sup> Bill Hull draws a helpful distinction between using methodologies to gather people and expecting a methodology to do the supernatural work of the Spirit, “I have no argument with the use of secular methodologies. My argument is with what is being communicated as significant. The church has become more effective in gathering people, especially in church planting. But the real issue is what do we do once people are there? This is the real work of the pastor, and no secular methodologies will help him do it. That calls for the supernatural work of God’s Spirit, to interest people in being disciples, learning how to reproduce and reach the world for Christ.”<sup>78</sup>

Methods and programs that seem to offer success in church ministry become more important than foundational Biblical principles when pragmatism takes hold. These methods (measured by the size of the impact) bury the supernatural dimensions of the church, its message and ministry in relative obscurity. This is evidenced in what some seeker church leaders give their *attention* to and what they *acknowledge* is the cause of their success. Some seeker church leaders give more *attention* to “strategy sessions” and “programming meetings” than an atmosphere of prayerful faith and trust. They have become so busy spinning the plates of seeker church strategy that the emphasis on the supernatural resources and power of God at work in the church is almost totally lost. When so little time is spent in prayer and God’s Word becomes a footnote in the Sunday morning service the church is in trouble. When given the opportunity to *acknowledge* what is behind their success, they often begin talking with most enthusiasm about the distinctiveness of their methods. Some seeker church leaders look down on churches in their community with an evangelical theology but traditional methodology. Pride in distinctives that glorify a methodology at the expense of unity around theology are wrong. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians reminds us “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:4-6 NIV). As Sally Morgenthaler says, “Too often, we worship our methodologies while feigning devotion to God.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 32.

<sup>76</sup> James I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* ((Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 27-28.

<sup>77</sup> MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 152.

<sup>78</sup> Hull, *Disciple Making Pastor*, 41.

<sup>79</sup> Morgenthaler, “Worship—The Real Thing,” 27.

## *Pragmatism Settles For Effectiveness Over Faithfulness*

Many of the criticisms of the seeker church are coupled with challenges to turn from unfaithfulness. The Cambridge Declaration chides, “The faithfulness of the evangelical church in the past contrasts sharply with its unfaithfulness in the present.”<sup>80</sup> Others imply that seeker ministry and cultural relevance are primarily a compromise of faithfulness. Often faithfulness and effectiveness are deemed to be mutually exclusive. MacArthur is perhaps the most dogmatic proponent of this position; “It is folly to think one can be both pragmatic *and* Biblical. The pragmatist wants to know *what works now*. The biblical thinker cares only about *what the Bible mandates*. The two philosophies oppose each other at the most basic level.”<sup>81</sup>

## *Responses To The Observations Of The Critics Regarding Pragmatism*

Many of the above criticisms need to be taken to heart by the seeker church movement. In pursuit of Biblical purity, the seeker church must eschew focusing on numbers alone, on growth before God, on methods that qualify only because they “work,” dependence on human ingenuity, any tendency to let methods obscure spiritual realities, and settling for effectiveness over faithfulness. Yet the critics do not acknowledge that perhaps the reason why Biblically pure seeker churches focus on methodology is because they know they can not improve the message—the gospel is the power of God unto salvation! Biblically there is freedom to use appropriate methods to spread the gospel; in fact, unless the critics want seeker churches to idolize methods they must be allowed to clothe the same powerful message in the changing cultural expressions of our time. Only when the locus of confidence for the seeker church changes from the message to the method will Biblical compromise have taken place.

Unfortunately, many critics see no room for pragmatic questions of quantity and effectiveness, even after putting the priority on Biblical faithfulness. Yet clearly Biblical truth has a place of secondary importance for such questions. Proverbs 21:31 declares, “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.” For example, the critics seem to view numbers themselves or the counting of them as inherently evil. David Barrett offers a Biblical response to those who deny any value to the use of numbers in the work of God’s kingdom. He examines six Scriptural mandates involving counting, “. . . that testify to the place and importance of enumeration, measurement and calculation in the work of God’s kingdom.” He also gives twenty-three examples more and claims there are as many as seventy-six examples in the Bible.<sup>82</sup>

Rick Warren responds very effectively to the critics and to the criticisms that seeker churches are purely pragmatic. Even the title of his book suggests a partial answer to the issue, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*. He deals with Myths About Growing Churches in Chapter 2 of his book. Among one of the myths he exposes is the myth that “The Only Thing That Large Churches Care About is Attendance.” He prefers the term church health to church growth but says, “Church growth is the natural result of church health. Church health can only occur when our message is biblical and our mission is balanced.” Another myth, that “You Must Choose Between Quality and Quantity in Your Church,” is answered by the observation:

*Quality* refers to the kind of disciples a church is producing. . . .

*Quantity* refers to the number of disciples a church is producing. Every church should want both. In fact, an exclusive focus on either quality or quantity will produce an unhealthy church. . . .

*A church that has no interest at all in increasing its number of converts is, in essence, saying to the rest of the world, “You can all go to hell.” If my three kids were lost on a wilderness trip, my wife and I would be consumed with finding them. We’d spare no expense to seek and save our lost children. And when we found one child, we wouldn’t think of calling off the search and just focusing on the one “quality” kid we had left. We’d keep looking as long as any child was still lost.*<sup>83</sup>

The popular saying that “You can’t measure success by numbers” is simply untrue. Warren rightly responds, “It all depends on what you’re counting! If you’re counting marriages saved, lives transformed, broken people healed, unbelievers becoming worshipers of Jesus, and members being mobilized for ministry and missions, numbers are extremely important.

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<sup>80</sup> “The Cambridge Declaration,” 10-11.

<sup>81</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 79-80.

<sup>82</sup> David B. Barrett, “Count the Worshipers!: The New Science of Missionaries.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 19, no. 4 (October 1995): 154-60. Barrett’s six examples are “take a census—Numbers 1:2a,” “count the worshippers—Revelation 11:1,” “List the names—Numbers 1:2b,” “measure the Temple—Revelation 11:1,” “calculate the cost—Luke 14:27-28,” “calculate the number—Revelation 13:18.”

<sup>83</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 51-52. This view of quality and quantity is entirely different than the statement by David Wells that the problem with seeker churches is the foundational assumption “that quality in the church *required* (*my italics*) quantity.” (David F. Wells, “Marketing the Church: Analysis and Assessment, Part 1,” *Faith and Mission* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 10). As with many critics, they never quite understand the principles behind the seeker church movement.

They have eternal significance.”<sup>84</sup> Warren also takes to task the myth that “You Must Compromise the Message and the Mission of the Church in Order to Grow.” As Warren points out, “It assumes that the presence of a large crowd indicates a “watered-down” message. . . Jesus drew large crowds yet he never compromised the truth.” And, finally, he rejects the idea that, “You can’t Learn From Large Churches.” He is clear--do not try to copy the context, the staff, the pastor, but do learn principles, a process and Biblically sound methods where they are applicable. In fact, Warren goes on to list primary and secondary issues of church health and growth. “Amongst primary issues are the following: *Who* is our master? *What* is our message? *What* is our motive? Amongst secondary issues are these: *Who* is our market? *What* are our models? *What* are our methods?”<sup>85</sup> Even George Barna, despite being extensively misquoted by the critics, says, “I don’t think numbers and numerical growth are most important. What I see the Scriptures telling us is that a successful church is where people’s lives are being transformed and becoming more Christ-like. You’ll never get a quality ministry by focusing on quantity first. Quality must precede quantity.”<sup>86</sup>

In discussing the issue of faithfulness and effectiveness a careful differentiation also needs to be made between faithfulness (to the message), faithfulness (as perseverance when the results are few), and faithfulness (to a method of sharing the gospel). We need to be faithful to the message always—no exceptions. To change the message because it is deemed ineffective will result in heresy. We need to be faithful in persevering when the results are few—in most cases. But we are also free to look for the most effective method we can find within the bounds of Scripture. To ask if our methods are ineffective and consider changing them may be the right thing to do and even honors the unchanging message. The real issue in the age-old question of faithfulness--vs.--effectiveness is not choosing faithfulness or effectiveness but how to hold both in tension. For a number of years, while working with an evangelistically ineffective church, I faithfully preached in open-air gospel meetings. It was a very ineffective method measured in terms of the purpose of the meeting--to see people come to faith in Christ. That I would persist with the same message and any method would be faithfulness. So why persist in that particular method? People who confuse methods with message are themselves corrupting the gospel. It is possible to believe all the right doctrines and use ineffective methods; it is happening all over the country and it is not glorifying to God. In some cases, faithfulness to a method can even become unfaithfulness to the cause of Christ. Rick Warren calls the idea that “All God Expects of Us Is Faithfulness” a “myth.” He says,

*Are you being faithful if you insist on doing ministry in a way that is comfortable for you, even though it doesn’t produce any fruit? Are you being faithful to Christ if you value man-made traditions more than reaching people for him? I contend that when a church continues to use methods that no longer work, it is being unfaithful to Christ!*

*Sadly, there are many churches today who are completely orthodox in their beliefs but are still unfaithful to Christ because they refuse to change programs, methods, styles of worship, buildings, or even locations in order to reach a lost world for Christ. Vance Havner used to say, “A church can be straight as a gun barrel doctrinally and just as empty spiritually.”<sup>87</sup>*

A question for the critics would be: “If any method of communicating always affects the message how has a traditional method in a modern setting affected the message?” Clearly Jesus, Paul and others did not sit in air-conditioned environment with choirs, stained glass windows, classical music, and a hi-tech sound system. So how has the use of these “methods” affected the message? They would reply, of course, that it has affected it but very little. They are discerning enough to know when these modern “methods” take priority over the message. The seeker church leader would claim the same God-given discernment.

The faithfulness to a method does not guarantee Biblical purity for the traditional church any more than the use of a new method necessarily causes loss of Biblical purity for the seeker church. For example, just as the critics of the seeker church would take issue with the practice (not necessarily the theology) of some seeker churches, likewise criticisms must be made of the practice of some traditional churches. That is to say, seeker church leaders may have no complaint with the theology of traditional church pastors who bore their congregations, nor the method of expository preaching as such, but with the practice of it in many churches. Thus, to counter MacArthur’s criticism, most seeker church pastors do not think expository preaching is inherently irrelevant, as did Fosdick. Indeed, some use expository preaching in their seeker services as we do at Cumberland Community Church. However, we do not look to the mere use of a method to ensure Biblical purity.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 48-71. These are Myths #’s 1,3,4, and 8. The other myths Warren deals with are Myth # 2: All Large Churches Grow at the Expense of Smaller Churches; Myth # 5: If you are Dedicated Enough, Your Church Will Grow; Myth # 6: There Is One Secret Key to Church Growth; and Myth # 7: All God Expects of Us Is Faithfulness.

<sup>86</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 18. Notes taken by the author, Sally Morgenthaler, at an Understanding Ministry in a Changing Culture seminar, 7 June 1993, Denver, CO.

<sup>87</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 65-66.

## Conclusion

While modernity inevitably affects the seeker church as part of the culture, its negative impact can be lessened through seeker church leaders being aware of its corrosive influence and its unique challenges. A seeker church leader who recognizes that cultural relevance is a two-way street, who recognizes the need to capture and hold the attention of the seeker without merely entertaining, who values meaningful Christian history, and who values theology before a pragmatic methodology will help build a culturally relevant, Biblically pure church.

Once again a recurrent theme from the critics is the relegation of Scripture to a secondary role in setting the church's strategy. The differences between the two camps cannot be minimized. While Os Guinness maintains that, "through its uncritical engagement with modernity, the church is becoming its own most effective gravedigger" proponents of seeker church would say that the church has become such through its lack of relevance and evangelistic effectiveness.<sup>88</sup> In reality, both are probably true. Bill Hull balances this with wise advice: "Let Scripture set the agenda, and then take what works for you from those experiencing various kinds of success. This will protect you from bondage to methods and from success that is rooted in cultural compromise."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 169.

<sup>89</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 59.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHALLENGES FOR THE SEEKER CHURCH: THE TOOLS OF MODERNITY

*“. . . evangelicals . . . carefully maintain theological orthodoxy while simultaneously uncritically accommodating to the tools of modernity whether in marketing the church or mending the soul.”*  
John Seel<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Modernity offers us new tools to engage with the world it has now shaped. They may seem to be the tools best equipped to deal with the facts and realities of sociological phenomenon but they are deemed double-edged at best and dangerous at worst by many critics. In this chapter we will look at these tools of modernity, and seek to understand how they result in marketing, therapeutic and managerial approaches to ministry. We will also discuss if these tools are essential to the seeker church or incidental to the goal of having culturally relevant, evangelistically effective churches.

#### **Concerns About The Tools Of Modernity**

Os Guinness warns, “. . . the megachurch movement is flirting dangerously with modernity. . . . Far from leading to an exodus, modern church growth often uses the ideology and tools of Egypt to make the life of the people of God more comfortable in captivity.”<sup>2</sup> Os Guinness, David Wells, Douglas Webster, and many others express a myriad of concerns about the ascension of the manager, the therapist, and the marketer as the new authorities in the world and the church. Speaking of the psychologist and the manager as the two most important cultural characters Wells says: “These characters now define what the professionalized pastor is becoming: in the pulpit, a psychologist whose business is to spread warm feelings; in the study, a CEO whose business is to have a successful year in terms of numbers.”<sup>3</sup> Many see a deeper parallel between megachurch pastors promoting the managerial direction of the church and the publishing industry promoting the therapeutic direction of a Christian worldview. Wells further observes:

*Modernity heavily favors psychology rather than religion as the best response to these crises of identity and faith. In the modern world religion is perceived as a part of the crises while psychology is seen as a part of the solution. In addition, religion is discounted as traditional, whereas psychology is prized as modern and scientific. But to cap it all, religion is virtually restricted to the private world, whereas psychology passes freely across the public/private divide. Industrial psychology, for example, has no counterpart in “industrial religion.”<sup>4</sup>*

The overarching concern of all critics is the extent to which Biblical truth is no longer the authority in setting the agenda of the church: “Adherence to formal orthodoxy is still strong, but such modern sources of authority as politics, psychology, and management theory routinely eclipse biblical authority in practice.”<sup>5</sup> Once the insights of marketing, psychology, and management have replaced the sufficiency of Scripture to guide and empower the church the message must forever keep pace with the new methodology. John Seel comments, “Consequently, while evangelicals have been intellectually defiant they have also been prone to practical accommodation. They carefully maintain theological orthodoxy while simultaneously uncritically accommodating to the tools of modernity whether in marketing the church or mending the soul.”<sup>6</sup>

#### **Concerns About Managerial Tools**

Former U. S. Senate chaplain Richard Halverson notes: “The church began as a fellowship of men and women centered on Jesus Christ. It went to Greece and became a philosophy. It went to Rome and became an institution. It went

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<sup>1</sup> Seel, “Modernity and Evangelicals” in *Faith and Modernity*, 295.

<sup>2</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> David Wells, “The D-Min-Ization Of The Ministry,” in Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 181.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>5</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Seel, “Modernity and Evangelicals,” in *Faith and Modernity*, 295.

to Europe and became a culture. It went to America and became an enterprise.”<sup>7</sup> Wells notes with disappointment what he calls, “the way in which, over the last quarter of a century, evangelical church life somewhat inadvertently has been remaking itself in the image of corporate America.”<sup>8</sup> This is seen in the way that entrepreneurial zeal takes precedence over evangelistic zeal—mirroring the culture’s hero-worship of the entrepreneur. Concepts that are invading the church such as striving for excellence, vision-casting, team-building, values-shaping, financial planning, sales approaches, and customer service concepts are all useful servants but deadly masters. Some seeker church pastors use these ideas and practices to feel better about themselves, to re-cast themselves as dashing young entrepreneurs rather than men of God. This has not been without consequence. Wells again observes: “As the technological world has encroached upon the pastorate, management by technique has come to replace management by truth.”<sup>9</sup> Thus marketplace ideas of excellence replace Biblical ideals of excellence.<sup>10</sup> “Tragically, (evangelicalism) has lost its traditional understanding of the centrality and sufficiency of God. In its long process or reorganization, it has turned from dependence on God to management of God . . .”<sup>11</sup> Another expression of the triumph of the managerial in evangelical circles is seen through the content of *Leadership* magazine. David Wells observes:

*The new model of the minister is nowhere better illustrated than in the pages of Leadership Journal. This publication, a spin-off from Christianity Today in 1980, is geared specifically to pastors and addressed every conceivable problem the church could encounter in the modern world. But a review of all the essays appearing between 1980 and 1988 shows that less than 1 percent made any obvious attempt to root the answers in anything biblical or doctrinal - despite the fact that many of the problems addressed are addressed directly in Scripture. Instead, the answers were taken heavily from the insights on the managerial and therapeutic revolutions. Furthermore, despite that this magazine attempts to offer wisdom on how to handle the problems of modernity (the clash of the world's values with Christian values), less than 1 percent of the essays attempted to understand the modern world in which the problems arose.*<sup>12</sup>

Again the concern of many critics is the displacement of theology in favor of managerial expertise in guiding the church.

It is important to recognize that the church as a true community is a supernatural work of God. Although true community is based on well-managed community, we should never value the latter over the former. The emphasis on managerial excellence in seeker churches and the tendency to fall prey to the pitfalls of modernity can cause us to settle for well-managed community or even value it more highly than true community. Larry Crabb makes this point: “Many local churches in the modern world, I suspect, value well-managed community above true community. We have sold out to our passion to control (and to the mystery-hating rationalism that feeds it) and, as a result, we work hard to develop professional communities, and we think that we’re after something good.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Concerns About Therapeutic Tools**

Os Guinness delivers a devastating critique of “the triumph of the therapeutic” and the arrival of “psychological man” showing how the psychological worldview has grown into an alternative authority, with an alternative worldview, an alternative language of skepticism, alternative priests, an alternative pathology, an alternative self, an alternative faith, and an alternative salvation.<sup>14</sup> Speaking of the therapeutic as an alternative authority he says, “The result is what David Powlison describes well as the ‘defer and refer’ syndrome. The relationship of the church to psychology becomes intellectually derivative, socially subordinate, and practically weak. High views of authority, even of inerrancy, make no difference. However orthodox the theology, the therapeutic has the final say in practice. Thus, the therapeutic becomes an alternative authority.”<sup>15</sup> Speaking of it as an alternative worldview he says, “‘Seeking help’ is more likely to mean a seventy-five dollar, fifty minute hour at the psychologist’s than a time of prayer and meditation with God or an unstinted time of counseling with a pastor, confessor or friend.”<sup>16</sup> He also sees therapy as an alternative salvation perceiving a, “. . . shift from salvation to self-realization, made up of smaller shifts from self-denial to self-love to self-mastery . . .”<sup>17</sup> In other words, modern man

<sup>7</sup> “Heart and Soul,” *Leadership* 17 (Summer 1996): 130.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, “Marketing the Church,” 6.

<sup>9</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 248.

<sup>10</sup> As Max Lucado said, “There is a canyon of difference between doing your best to glorify God and doing whatever it takes to glorify yourself. The quest for excellence is a mark of maturity. The quest for power is childish.” (From the authors notes—source unknown).

<sup>11</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 296.

<sup>12</sup> David Wells, “The D-Min-Ization of the Ministry,” in Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Crabb, “The Practice of True Community,” *Mars Hill Review*: Premiere Issue, 15-23.

<sup>14</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 115, 121-30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

is more interested in harnessing transcendent power for his own human ends than worshipping a transcendent God for the glory of God. David Wells laments the condition in which God's holiness weighs lightly on the church. He sees it emanating from the general effects of modernity, from the church subordinating God's holiness to his benevolence and, most interestingly, from the loss of a sense of moral responsibility. "We have taken hold of the language of our therapeutic culture, from which moral responsibility has now more or less vanished, insisting that our preachers serve up psychological wisdom in place of biblical truth, and we have ended up with a form of Christian faith in which the holiness of God has little significance."<sup>18</sup>

Guinness observes, "To a people dependent on tradition, the therapeutic is a leading carrier of 'progressive ideas' that claim to liberate people from the inhibitions of truth, morality and community."<sup>19</sup> Sick and sinful people often want freedom from things they have violated--truth, morality, community--the role of the church is to show them how the grace of God leads them to back to him and to face their responsibilities. Describing the therapeutic movement as "one of the prime solvents of American reality and responsibility," Guinness goes on to charge it with undermining thrift and denial resulting in ". . . a vicious cycle in which new expectations generate new discontents, which in turn generate new therapists. Thus, citizens degenerate into consumers (of things) and clients (of therapy). Their reward--and fate--is to be preoccupied with a never-ending supply of new toys, new drugs and new liberations."<sup>20</sup> His final observation is that:

*There is a perverse feature of Christian cultural surrender: When Christians freely capitulate to some trend or another, our commitment is often as fierce as it is late. Often, it can only be pried loose when the secular world leads Christians to abandon what it earlier led them to adopt. This cycle is already evident in the recovery movement. The euphoria of latter-day evangelical converts is rising just as secular enthusiasm is waning. Christianity Today has many advertisements ("Christian Public Service Announcements") for recovery hotlines just as books like The Freudian Fraud are being published and Newsweek has a cover story on "the curse of self-esteem." The lesson seems to be: Buy late and always be out of date.<sup>21</sup>*

James Davidson Hunter points out that every time a pastor appeals to "medical and psychological proof" as reason for avoiding a certain course of action (as opposed to "what the Bible teaches") he has "tacitly submitted to the linguistic domination" of modernity's categories.<sup>22</sup> While appealing to such reasoning for the sake of the seeker is not wrong, it must never become the source of authority in a pastor's message or misplace the Word of God. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals laments, "a loss of absolute values, permissive individualism, and a substitution of wholeness for holiness, recovery for repentance, intuition for truth, feeling for belief, chance for providence, and immediate gratification for enduring hope. Christ and his cross have moved from the center of our vision."<sup>23</sup>

### **Concerns About Marketing Tools**

Both the managerial and the therapeutic find themselves combined in the art and science of the marketer. Marketing requires an adaptation of the church to those dominant cultural categories and it also uses the insights of both those disciplines to accomplish its goals.

While there are many definitions of marketing one name in the evangelical world is associated with the idea more than anyone else--George Barna. Barna does himself no favors by some of his claims: "My contention, based on careful study of data and the activities of American churches, is that the major problem plaguing the Church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment . . . The marketing plan is the Bible of the marketing game; everything that happens in the life of the product happens because the plan wills it."<sup>24</sup> However one views these statements, the truth is that Barna makes much of the ability of sociological statistics and insights to fuel the church in its mission of reaching the unchurched. Because of its association with Barna's name, the seeker church is viewed by many as *necessarily* embracing a marketing approach to ministry.

What is marketing? It is far more than promoting the ministries of the church in the community, advertising in the Yellow Pages, printing and mailing flyers, and publicizing the church. Questions about marketing are often answered in terms of marketing only as publicity. For example, Bill Hybels, questioned about Willow Creek, says, ". . . We have a \$15 million annual budget; less than a fraction of 1 percent is spent on any form of marketing. We don't do advertising blitzes. We don't use radio or television spots. We don't put signs on billboards. We don't pass pamphlets through the

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<sup>18</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>22</sup> James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 306.

<sup>23</sup> "The Cambridge Declaration," 6.

<sup>24</sup> George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 23, 45.

neighborhood. We just don't do marketing. My feeling is that if you have to resort to marketing, you're probably overlooking fundamentals that deserve more attention."<sup>25</sup> The marketing that is the target of the critics goes to the very heart of the way some seeker churches have shaped their message and methods to their target audience--the consumer in search of religion. Marketing is primarily a business strategy for discovering what the consumer wants so the product can be tailored to meet those "felt needs." David Wells defines it as, "adapting what the local church is and offers to the desires of its potential customers"<sup>26</sup> Wells acknowledges that no one sets out to change the message but the message is eventually affected. Barna defines marketing as, "Church marketing is the performance of both business and ministry activities that impact the church's target audience with the intention of ministering to and fulfilling their spiritual, social, emotional, or physical needs and thereby satisfy the ministry goals of the church."<sup>27</sup> Greg Pritchard believes that Barna identifies the church as the marketer, the product as the gospel, and the audience (those with needs) as the consumers.<sup>28</sup> He sees Willow Creek as the "poster boy" for Barna's theories,

*Willow Creek has so enthusiastically adopted and applied the principles of marketing that it has received growing attention from business schools and publications. Harvard Business School, for instance, selected Willow Creek as the subject of one of its famous case studies. Its author, who was eventually hired as the president of the Willow Creek Association, explains that the staff of Willow Creek "attribute much of their success to the simple concept of knowing your customers and meeting their needs" (authors emphasis).<sup>29</sup>*

Some are very critical of what they perceive to be the seeker church's marketing approach. John MacArthur charges that, "(Pragmatists) lose confidence in the power of God to use the preached gospel to reach hardened unbelievers. That's why they approach evangelism as a marketing problem. Their methodology is shaped accordingly."<sup>30</sup> Greg Pritchard is a cautious advocate of Willow Creek and seeker ministry yet delivers a devastating critique of the excesses of a marketing approach to the gospel: "The temptation of image, the quagmire of psychology, the dilution of a biblical view of God, and the loss of the centrality of truth are the direct consequences of a marketing method. If marketing principles are followed consistently, one ends up with a Schullerian style of Christianity that emphasizes performance and psychology and presents a sub-biblical understanding of God and man."<sup>31</sup>

The criticisms fall into three main categories. First, that marketers have too simplistic a view of culture and people; second, that a marketing approach is at fault in addressing felt needs; and third, a marketing approach is flawed in trying to market the church and the gospel.

#### *A Simplistic View Of Marketing And People*

One of the complaints made by the critics is that marketing has too simplistic a view of culture and human beings to drive the agenda of the church.<sup>32</sup> Douglas Webster argues that, "The church marketer's analysis of culture is so superficial that it is deceptive."<sup>33</sup> Webster argues:

*... If a Christian desires to understand cultural dynamics and where American culture is headed, he or she would be better off reading such books as Daniel Yankelovich's New Rules: Searching for Self Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down, Christopher Lasch's The Culture of Narcissism and The Minimal Self, Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind, Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business and Robert Bellah's Habits of the Heart. These works are far more helpful for illuminating the baby boomer than George Barna's analysis or Doug Murren's advice.*

*In The Christian Mind, British writer Harry Blamires offers this assessment:*

*Thus prophetic condemnation of salient features of contemporary secularism comes nowadays from secularists themselves whose ground of judgement is a humanistic one. It is clear that where there is no Christian mind to pass judgement upon society, those who care for human dignity and integrity on other grounds than the Christian's will be provoked to rebel against the multifarious tendencies of contemporary civilization to depersonalize men and women. This rebellion must be regarded as a significant feature of the post-Christian world. It is good in itself. That is to say, the protest needs to be made. What is bad is that it should come from outside the Christian tradition.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Hybels, "Selling Out the House of God?" 20-25.

<sup>26</sup> Wells, "Marketing the Church," 13.

<sup>27</sup> Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>30</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 244.

<sup>32</sup> See also the discussion in Chapter 6 of this thesis on "Do Seeker Churches Have An Adequate Biblical Understanding Of The 'Seeker?'"

<sup>33</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

Additionally, the seeker churches view of people is considered to be reductionistic. Webster says, “Market research may be fine for the marketplace, where everyone is a consumer, but for the church it offers a superficial, reductionistic view of people.”<sup>35</sup> With a marketing approach, the potential Christian is considered a consumer (rather than someone who is being invited to join the Biblical community of believers) and the consumer is considered sovereign. Robert Wenz laments, “A marketing approach applied to a narcissistic age has transformed countless evangelicals into church consumers. It has even made some into church connoisseurs.”<sup>36</sup> David Wells argues that church leaders must see seekers not as “consumers of inner experiences and things religious” but as “moral knowers and actors.”<sup>37</sup> “A business is in the market simply to sell its products; it doesn’t ask consumers to surrender themselves to the product. The church, on the other hand, does call for such a surrender. It is not merely marketing a product; it is declaring Christ’s sovereignty over all of life and declaring the necessity of obedient submission to him and to the truth of his Word.”<sup>38</sup>

Bill Hull reminds us that “user-friendly” is not a term that lies alongside commitment very easily, “High commitment is not user-friendly! By definition, *user-friendly* means that learning a skill or reaching a goal is easy the first time and every time. Nothing worthy of honor works that way. You can’t cram ten years of experience into a seminar.”<sup>39</sup> Webster asks:

*... A critical question for the market-sensitive church is whether insight into the mind and culture of the baby boomer generation leads to a prophetic penetration of this market niche with the gospel or promotes a culturally compatible affirmation of the culture. Does the gospel of the market-driven church redeem the lost or reinforce trends, deliver from sin or affirm the self, reconcile people to God or appeal to religious consumers?*

*... Biblical prophets have looked at culture very differently. One could hardly confuse the prophets’ penetrating judgment of culture with a marketing report. Instead of looking to the marketplace to understand what appeals to the human heart, the prophets used the Word of God to penetrate prevailing cultural norms and expectations. They resisted the religious powers’ accommodating efforts to reassure people that their greedy consumption, entertaining worship and striving for success met with God’s approval.*<sup>40</sup>

The danger of marketing the church is that we encourage people to turn to a God that will fulfill our needs rather than a God we must obey and to whom we must surrender.<sup>41</sup> Greg Pritchard warns that a marketing approach leads to, among other pitfalls, the allure of success, the temptation of image and a fulfillment theology.<sup>42</sup>

*Likewise, Creekers (and many other evangelicals) in the lap of American luxury are faced with a different temptation—the idolatry of personal fulfillment. Personal fulfillment is the dominant goal of the vast majority of Americans. In this context it is a great temptation for American evangelicals to argue that Christianity is a means of a more fulfilling life. In this environment the gospel becomes a means to fulfillment and the church becomes another place that promises to satisfy emotional desires. This same biased method that liberation theology uses of picking verses to support one’s aspirations is just as faulty if employed by Americans seeking to prove that God’s children are promised fulfillment in this life. It is the same shallow cultural hermeneutics, but this time practiced from the perspective of North American abundance.*<sup>43</sup>

#### *Addressing Felt Needs*

Saddleback Valley and Willow Creek, like many other seeker churches, take the issue of felt needs seriously. Willow Creek aim their programs at the felt needs of their target audience—a 25-45 year old male. Their research for understanding Unchurched Harry includes relationships with Unchurched Harrys, research retreats, and professional research of the unchurched.<sup>44</sup> They have identified the felt needs of Unchurched Harry as personal fulfillment, identity, companionship, marriage, family, relief of stress, meaning, and morality.

The critics either reject outright this desire to address felt needs or express the dangers of so doing. Bill Hull charges the evangelical church with acting like a child with a new toy and making an appeal for theology before sociology:

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>36</sup> Wenz, *Room for God?* 24.

<sup>37</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>39</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 66,70.

<sup>41</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 114.

<sup>42</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 244-255.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 63.

*As churches and pastors expect a more clever gadgetry from the marketing wizards, the latter are encouraged to become increasingly creative until the methods eventually bury the message in obscurity. For that reason, church growth should not be a primer for building effective churches; it has a sociological base, it is data-driven, and it worships at the altar of pragmatism. It esteems that which works above all and defines success in worldly and short-sighted terms. It offers models that cannot be reproduced and leaders who cannot be imitated. The principles of modern business are revered more than doctrine; the latter, in fact, often being perceived as a detriment or at least a distraction to church growth. Yet churches are supposed to be driven by scriptural teachings, not the latest marketing surveys or consumer trends.*

*In short, theology before sociology, please.<sup>45</sup>*

Others also say felt needs have to be treated cautiously, especially where they are considered to be innocent and the truth that human sin and depravity underlies them is overlooked. Os Guinness warns that the current stress on felt needs, “. . . might lead to one of the mightiest spiritual harvests in Christian history, but they might also lead to a bumper crop of Western ‘rice Christians’ that makes a mockery of the gospel and of the seriousness of the hour. What does it say of the church when *Newsweek* can note that ‘the least demanding churches are now in greatest demand’? Or when one church can advertise: ‘Instead of me fitting a religion I found a religion to fit me?’<sup>46</sup>

#### *Marketing The Church and The Gospel*

Unfortunately, just as an uncritical acceptance of modernity flows from a view that all culture is innocent so an uncritical view of marketing puts culture in control. As historian David Potter pointed out in his penetrating analysis of advertising: “Once marketing becomes dominant, the concern is not with ‘finding an audience to hear their message but rather with finding a message to hold their audience.’<sup>47</sup> Referring to some seeker churches as market-driven churches Bill Hull warns that: “What drives the church both dictates and predicts its future. If the market drives the church, then culture is in control. The mood of our contemporary culture, particularly dominated by media, will define relevance and meaning.”<sup>48</sup> Joseph Stowell also warns, “. . . when we play to man first, when what he wants becomes the determining factor, it can corrupt not only our worship, but our theology. Given enough time, the inevitable end of man-centered worship and ministry is heresy.”<sup>49</sup>

Many seeker churches must recognize the extent to which this danger threatens the gospel as communicated by the evangelical movement. Consider, for example, this observation by John Seel of a discussion in the magazine of a major evangelical seminary regarding church membership:

*Boomers, we are told, have low product loyalty as well as a low degree of commitment to programs. Thus the writer concludes, “It will make obsolete the traditional definition of a church home.” In other words, people will no longer have a single church home but multiple church homes. On any given Sunday they will wake up and choose a particular church which they feel will meet the needs they feel most keenly that morning. Rather than exhort members to biblical faithfulness and commitment the church is exhorted to accommodate to the prevailing trends. On the basis of this logic, serial church homes will soon be followed by the equal acceptance of serial marriages. For the premise of meeting “felt needs” finally justifies the subjective criteria by which modern Americans make their personal choices whether in church homes or marriage partners.<sup>50</sup>*

### **Do Seeker Churches Overuse The Tools Of Modernity?**

When it comes to assessing the overuse of the managerial, therapeutic, or marketing tools in the seeker church three questions arise. First, is the overuse of these tools *a real problem* in the seeker church? Second, is the resulting problem *specific to* the seeker church? Third, is the resulting problem *an essential part of* the seeker church? These three questions could be summarized as, “Do they do this? Do they and they alone do this? Must they do this?”

#### ***Do Seeker Churches Overuse Managerial Tools?***

Some seeker churches do give the impression the tools of management are the answer for an ailing church. Willow Creek has included secular business speakers in their leadership conferences and can easily convey the idea to the

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<sup>45</sup> Charles W. Colson and Michael Scott Horton, *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 141-42.

<sup>46</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 79-80; quoting Kenneth L Woodward, “A Time to Seek,” *Newsweek*, 17 December 1990, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> David M. Potter, *People of Plenty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 154.

<sup>48</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 60.

<sup>49</sup> Stowell, *Shepherding The Church*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Seel, “Modernity and Evangelicals,” in *Faith and Modernity*, 303.

undiscerning that the power behind Willow Creek is organizational and leadership genius.<sup>51</sup> Some pastors turn too eagerly to the categories and processes of the business world to accomplish with secular tools what God wants accomplished with spiritual tools. One wonders whether they suffer from an inferiority complex over having never experienced the business world or perhaps they imagine it has more to offer than it indeed has. The point must be made; the issue is not whether the church has *any* management, organizational or administrative practices—every church will; the issue is will these practices be bad (dishonoring God) or good (giving God glory) and will they serve or displace the spiritual priorities of the church. While recognizing a potential problem, Richard Mouw has a much more charitable view of the church's use of the managerial and therapeutic:

*... what is the evidence that shows that contemporary lay people lack the theological savvy of their forebears? Is it that the laity today are too taken up with such things as recovery groups and managerial methods? Simply to assume that such things are clear signs of theological decline is to beg the question . . .*

*... I am inclined to think that to the degree that fundamentalists really are becoming managerial and therapeutic, they ought to be given credit for working on some important weaknesses in their movement. The managerial culture pays much attention, for example, to such things as organizational "process" and conflict management; these are areas where fundamentalist communities have been notoriously weak. Similarly, if fundamentalists, who have in their own ways fostered a highly intellectualized understanding of Christian faith, are now attending to such therapeutic concerns as "being in touch with your feelings" and "listening skills," this could be a major step in the right direction.<sup>52</sup>*

Is the overuse of managerial tools a problem specific to the seeker church? No; the seeker church movement is affected as part of evangelicalism at large. While that does not mean the problem should be ignored, it does mean that it is a common problem to contemporary and traditional churches--the style of ministry is not the issue. Is this a vital and necessary part of the seeker church? Kimon Sargeant's survey revealed that seeker church pastors viewed managing the church as fairly low-level priority (only 15.1% thought it the most important task on which to focus their efforts).<sup>53</sup> These facts, and the existence of many seeker churches that have an appropriate but limited role for managerial tools, tell us that their overuse is not a necessary part of a seeker church.

### ***Do Seeker Churches Overuse Therapeutic Tools?***

The questions we are trying to answer are if the misuse of therapeutic tools is a problem in the seeker church and is either specific to or an essential part of the seeker church. As part of a larger evangelical movement, the seeker church is influenced heavily by the triumph of the therapeutic worldview as described by the critics. Many seeker church messages now take their agenda from the world's therapeutic view of wholeness. Seeker churches are even more prone than traditional churches to accept this psychologized view of life due to the influence of Willow Creek. Consequently, series titles sound like they have been prepared in the self-help section of the local bookstore. Unintentionally they can communicate the message of the gospel as "God will save you from your *problems*" not "God will save you from your *sins*." Worse still, they may give the impression that God's *order of priority* is saving you from your problems first (because that is the main focus of the message) and then saving you from your sins. Philip Rieff's comment captures the difference "Religious man was born to be saved, psychological man is born to be pleased."<sup>54</sup>

As has already been said, one of the three main themes of Willow Creek's teaching is that "It works"<sup>55</sup> This is evidenced in an emphasis in teaching on topics such as temperament, family history, emotions, patterns of addiction, and 12 step programs. Greg Pritchard points out how the American psychological worldview is evident in the prevalence of self-help books recommended by Hybels and his staff and made available in the Willow Creek bookstore. Additionally, counseling is highly recommended to all, and fifty percent of the staff have pursued it; ". . . psychological categories have become a part of the very worldview of how individuals see reality. . . People identify themselves as "codependent" and argue that others violated their "boundaries". . . Many Creekers not only view everything and everyone with these categories, but they also are unable to refrain from using them."<sup>56</sup> ". . . This felt-need approach to relevance ultimately distorts (Willow Creek's) Christianity."<sup>57</sup> It leads to people wanting to "clarify their psychological identity, structure their

<sup>51</sup> It may well be! Bill Hybels is an extraordinarily gifted individual. What ordinary pastors need is to know that the Word of God, the people of God and the Spirit of God are what they need to get the job done. The leadership and management of a megachurch is different than the average local church.

<sup>52</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 35, 64.

<sup>53</sup> See Appendix G.

<sup>54</sup> From Philip Rieff, *The Triumph Of The Therapeutic* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1987) 24-25, as quoted in Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 130.

<sup>55</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 278. Three regular topics: Psychology 'It works' Apologetics 'Its true' Business management 'Its useful'.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

relationships according to psychological categories, and pursue personal fulfillment” and becomes what James Davison Hunter calls “a psychological Christocentrism.”<sup>58</sup> The effect of all of this is that psychological categories and worldliness are introduced to the church:

*... Ironically, while Hybels is evangelizing those in the world toward Christianity, he is also evangelizing Christians toward the world. As the unchurched Harrys in the audience (10 percent) move closer to Christianity, the Christians in the audience (90 percent) are often becoming more psychological and worldly. . . . This tendency to compromise Christian truth is built into this model the church. An unintended consequence of this approach to doing church is the latent temptation to water down the biblical message with the culture's categories.*

*... Creekers have sought to use the compass of psychological categories to guide their journey through American culture. The result of this strategy is that they have fallen into a quagmire of psychology again and again. They periodically realize their predicament and attempt to climb to firmer ground. They have yet to realize that the very compass of the psychological worldview that they are using to escape the quagmire is repeatedly leading them back to it.<sup>59</sup>*

The overuse of psychological categories is often justified by the modern believer with the response that “just as we go to a doctor not the Bible for a broken arm, we go to mental health professionals for broken relationships.” But this is a seriously flawed argument for the Christian. The Bible makes little claim to be a guide book for fixing broken arms and its wisdom would direct us to the doctor unless God chose to do a miracle. But in the arena of relationships the Bible makes very significant claims which should never be compared to the insights of the mental health professional. It offers the answer in the grace and truth of God’s Word, lived out in the life-giving environment of the Christian community. The Bible does not preclude the help of the mental health professional, but our primary focus still needs to be the application of the undiluted truth of God’s Word. Often the phrase, “all truth is God’s truth” is used to justify an unhealthy preoccupation with whatever we choose to make our focus. While it is indeed true that all truth is God’s truth, nevertheless, the Bible claims, unlike other books, to be the distilled essence of God’s truth. While I can read much of any other book and not know for sure if I am getting any of God’s truth (often hidden, as it is, among dangerous alternatives), I can read a little of the Bible and know for sure I am getting much of God’s truth.

Both the managerial and therapeutic emphasis is combined in the tendency of seeker churches to lean on tools (personality tests such as Myers-Briggs being the most popular of many that are used) to do everything from screening potential staff to finding a ministry match for volunteers. Again, these are useful tools in their right place, but thought needs to be given as to whether the illusion of “certainty” given by these tools and the people who promote them displaces confidence in the Biblical principles and priorities for making the same decisions. For example, how much time do leaders in seeker churches spend in prayer before selecting staff? How much do they encourage volunteers to seek God in directing them to a place of service? My experience and observations of modern evangelicalism and the seeker church confirms the alarm-bells of the critics. John Seel laments, “. . . we have progressively created institutions with such organizational potential that an awareness of the invisible spiritual reality, the need for prayer, or even God himself is no longer needed to achieve maximum results.”<sup>60</sup>

At the best of times sociology, behavioral sciences and systems theory cannot adequately explain the diversity of human behavior. They are often built on speculative foundations and although many interesting facts may be uncovered in research, how those facts are presented as part of an overall theory or approach can often be misleading. The all-too-common approach among Christians wishing to use the tools is to look around for the most interesting research in secular circles, stretch a few proof texts to match the theory and present the result as theology! Also, it is only in the last 20-30 years as educational and research opportunities have multiplied that thousands of case studies have resulted in countless pieces of information on life and relationships. One has to assume that given another 20-30 years we will be dealing with an avalanche of information. If we were omniscient, the flow of information would be unceasing. God himself has an infinite number of interesting observations about relationships. But if we are to invest time and energy in the pursuit and application of relevant data several questions arise for the thoughtful Christian:

*If so much of this information is so vital to good relationships, have the generations of Christians who have had to rely on the Bible alone been at a disadvantage?*

*If so much of this information is so vital to good relationships how does the 90% of Christendom outside the U.S. with access to little more than a Bible expect to handle their struggles, relationships, and families?*

*If so much of this information is so vital to good relationships how does God expect the Christian to assimilate all the possible information pertinent to glorifying him in their struggles, relationships and families?*

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 231-232.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>60</sup> Seel, “Modernity and Evangelicals,” in *Faith and Modernity*, 302.

The real question becomes this: on what authority do we select the facts we apply to our circumstances? From where do we get the wisdom to discern what we should focus on. It would be reasonable to assume that God has already dealt with that in giving us his Word. Surely, as God, he has given us a book with all the “right pieces of information.” In addition, where he is silent we can use the best information we can find—with great caution—while always keeping an emphasis on the priority of his word.<sup>61</sup>

In short, the misuse of therapeutic tools is a problem in the seeker church. But again, the seeker church movement is affected as part of evangelicalism at large—the style of ministry is not specifically the cause of this problem. Indeed, correcting this problem would enhance the ministry of seeker churches. Additionally, the misuse of therapeutic tools is not an essential part of the seeker church. The existence of many seeker churches that have an appropriate but limited role for therapeutic tools confirms this.

### ***Do Seeker Churches Overuse Marketing Tools?***

Again with regard to the overuse of marketing tools in the seeker church the three questions we are trying to answer are, “Is this a *real problem* in the seeker church, is the resulting problem *specific to* the seeker church, and is the resulting problem *an essential part of* the seeker church?” This time the problem that the seeker church has does not seem to be because it is part of the larger evangelical church movement. It is a challenge more particular to the seeker church. However, as we shall see, while it can be a real problem for some seeker churches, the errors in misusing marketing tools are not an essential part of the seeker church.

In his survey of seeker church pastors, Kimon Sargeant asked, “What are the key strategies for seeker churches?”<sup>62</sup> When marketing is defined by advertising, mailings, phone contacts, surveys, and the like, 70% agreed that “the church must develop a marketing orientation to in order to reach people effectively.” More tellingly equal numbers of pastors agreed and disagreed that “by focusing on felt needs of seekers, churches run the risk of conforming to the secular world” (44% agreed 43% disagreed). A staggering 84.5% agreed that “in order to gain a hearing for the gospel, churches today must meet the felt needs of seekers.” While these statistics dispel the myth marketing is *essential* to a seeker church they also reveal that many pastors in the seeker church movement place a *heavy emphasis* on marketing.

Marketing is clearly wrong when it entails any kind of adaptation of the Christian faith to the “consumer.” The marketing of the gospel can lead to a presentation in some seeker churches of a God who will fulfill our needs rather than a God we must obey and to whom we must surrender. I have listened to several messages that addressed the issue of how to find fulfillment (with *Readers Digest* depth and content) and then tagged on the name of God or the words of Jesus as support for the goal of happiness. The message in a nutshell was, “Here are 5 steps to happiness; Oh, by the way, holiness brings happiness too; isn’t God cool for suggesting that.” These messages must change if the seeker church is going to transform the culture. Bill Hybels warns, “Contagious churches have learned that they must communicate *to* their culture without compromising *with* their culture. They know that if the message of the cross of Christ is ever diluted or hidden, then the battle has already been lost. What good is it to learn to speak the language of secular people if we lose our message in the process?”<sup>63</sup>

However, the critics have made too much of the surveys and target-group studies done by Willow Creek, Saddleback Valley, and other churches.<sup>64</sup> They say that Hybels found out what unchurched people liked so he could spoon-feed it back to them. Hybels responds:

*... that . . . is so far from the truth it doesn't even sting . . . You don't ask people outside the family of God how to put a church together. What I was more interested in was the sensitivities, the bruises, and the disillusionment that these people had experienced from churches they had attended in the past. The survey revealed that the number one reason people gave for leaving church was that the church was “always asking for money”; this translated into a sensitivity by the church to avoid the appearance of ONLY being after money. Likewise, another reason given was church was boring; this led to a desire to ensure that services were not boring but rather relevant to peoples needs.*<sup>65</sup>

George Barna reminds us that the real goal is to avoid offering irrelevant solutions to people’s problems: “Unless we take the time and make the effort to discover—objectively and factually—what people care about, how they hurt, and what service they look to the church to offer, we run a serious risk of being irrelevant and of little value to the people who need what we

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<sup>61</sup> While I have no doubt that knowledge of birth order traits (for example) can be interesting, I suspect that if God thought it necessary for spiritual growth he would have made it clearer in the Bible.

<sup>62</sup> See Appendix G.

<sup>63</sup> Hybels and Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, 209.

<sup>64</sup> Willow Creek describes ‘unchurched Harry and Mary.’ Lee Strobel’s book is a primer on what Harry likes and dislikes and how to reach him. Rick Warren talks about ‘Saddleback Sam’.

<sup>65</sup> Hybels, “Selling Out the House of God?” 22.

have to offer.”<sup>66</sup> When asked, “How do you move a person from a consumer orientation of fulfilling felt needs to a Christian focus on self-denial?” Hybels responded, “Through teaching, prayer, fellowship, service, discipleship, mentoring, discipline. Through all the means of grace that people have been using for 2,000 years.” David Wells actually agrees with many pastors in the seeker church movement when he calls for churches to adapt the forms but not the essence of the Christian faith to accommodate outsiders.

... *I think the church marketers are correct to give attention to who is sitting in the pews, what these people understand their own needs to be, why they're coming into church, what issues are important to them, where they feel pain, where they are perplexed, and why this is the case.*

... *So I have no complaint with the sensitivity the marketers say we ought to have to the people in our pews. In fact, I applaud it.*

... *It is right for us to want to see the church grow. It is wrong, in my opinion, for us to adapt Christian faith to sinners when we view as religious consumers in order to make this happen. It is right for churches to be hospitable to outsiders; it is wrong for a church to surrender its character as a gathering of the people of God for worship, proclamation, and service. It is right to give attention to who is sitting in the pews, to understand the world from which they come. It is sheer folly to imagine that the desires, the cognitive horizons, and the appetites that unbelievers bring with them are not shot through with values.*<sup>67</sup>

In assessing the problem it is also necessary and appropriate to distinguish between felt needs and real needs. For instance, at Cumberland Community Church, in planning the services, we may recognize a seeker may come with the need to get out of debt; his felt need may be financial, his real need is to recognize that his condition is a result of trying to serve Mammon, to put God first, and to seek first the kingdom of God. Likewise, Douglas Webster, an outspoken critic of the marketing approach still acknowledges:

*The fact that Jesus and the apostles were sensitive, creative communicators is undeniable. What divides their preaching from modern preaching is the focus of their sensitivity and the nature of their creativity. Unquestionably, New Testament preaching was personally powerful and culturally relevant. The reason for that 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.*<sup>68</sup>

We also need to distinguish between felt needs as a starting place in communicating with the seeker and real needs which must eventually be addressed by Scriptural truth. Rick Warren lays out a Biblical rationale for starting with felt needs but clearly makes the point that they are a starting place only:

*I do not believe verse-by-verse teaching through the books of the Bible is the most effective way to evangelize the unchurched. Instead, you must start on common ground, just as Paul did with his pagan audience at the Areopagus in Athens.*

*Our English word communication comes from the Latin word communis, which means “common.”*

*The ground we have in common with unbelievers is not the Bible, but our common needs, hurts, and interests as human beings. You cannot start with a text, expecting the unchurched to be fascinated by it. You must first capture their attention, and then move them to the truth of God's Word. . . . (by) “verse-with-verse” exposition, or topical exposition. (In seminary, verse-with-verse topical exposition is called systematic theology!)*

*Today, “preaching to felt needs” is scorned and criticized in some circles as a cheapening of the Gospel and a sellout to consumerism. I want to state this in the clearest way possible: Beginning a message with people's felt needs is more than a marketing tool! It is based on the theological fact that God chooses to reveal himself to man according to our needs! Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with examples of this.*

*Even the names of God are revelations of how God meets our felt needs! Throughout history when people have asked God, “What is your name?” God's response has been to reveal himself according to what they needed at that time: To those who needed a miracle, God revealed himself as Jehovah Jireh (I am your provider); to those who needed comfort, God revealed himself as Jehovah Shalom (I am your peace); to those who needed salvation, God revealed himself as Jehovah Tsidkenu (I am your righteousness). The examples go on and on. God meets us where we are, at our point of need. Preaching to felt needs is a theologically sound approach to introducing people to God.*

*Preaching that changes lives brings the truth of God's Word and the real needs of people together through application.*

*God's Word    →→    Application    ←←    People's needs*

*Which end of the continuum you begin with depends on your audience. But what is even more important is that you eventually bring God's*

<sup>66</sup> Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 54-55.

<sup>67</sup> Wells, “Marketing the Church,” 14.

<sup>68</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 83.

*truth and people's needs together through application, regardless of where the message begins.*

*Both verse-by-verse (book) exposition and verse-with-verse (topical) exposition are necessary in order to grow a healthy church.<sup>69</sup>*

The focus on felt needs is unhealthy if it obscures the fact that a genuine seeker will have a felt need for and a desire to know God. Sometimes it is appropriate and necessary to address the real needs of seekers directly. Sally Morgenthaler reminds us of the obvious, "Too often we as pastors and worship leaders get so busy with our technique and so consumed with how much felt-need information we can dispense, we miss the very felt-need that brings most people through our doors: meeting God."<sup>70</sup> Again she reminds us, ". . . We need to be very careful about designing all of our ministry strategies according to the expressed biases of an irreligious public. At times the church's best response is to give seekers what they need instead of what they say they want."<sup>71</sup> The Cambridge Declaration also calls us back to Scripture: "Scripture must take us beyond our perceived needs to our real needs and liberate us from seeing ourselves through the seductive images, cliches, promises, and priorities of mass culture. It is only in the light of God's truth that we understand ourselves aright and see God's provision for our need."<sup>72</sup> Clearly Jesus did not address all the felt needs of his day. How many times did he address the Roman occupation, legal, and political issues? On several occasions he moved quickly (almost contrarily) beyond a felt need to a real need.<sup>73</sup> He sent many away disappointed that what he offered did not match their felt needs and yet retained his own disciples because they recognized he had the words of eternal life (John 6:66-68). The very lack of his words being too rooted in the felt needs of his day give his words a timeless relevance.

The last question we are trying to answer is this, "Is the misuse of marketing tools *an essential part of the seeker church?*" The answer is "No." Those who desire to reach out to seekers will want to and need to adapt non-essentials for the benefit of the people they are trying to reach; but nothing of importance needs to be adapted. The message of the gospel is timeless. Seeker-oriented does not mean being consumer-driven; recognizing felt needs does not preclude addressing real needs. I can honor God and love my neighbor enough to reach him in his own comfort zone; I can give him home-field advantage when it comes to non-essentials and gain an even better hearing for the non-negotiable truths of the gospel. Wells sums this up:

*The fact is that while we may be able to market the church, we cannot market Christ, the gospel, Christian character, or meaning in life. The church can offer handy child care to weary parents, intellectual stimulation to the restless video generation, a feeling of family to the lonely and dispossessed--and, indeed, lots of people come to churches for these reasons. But neither Christ nor his truth can be marketed by appealing to consumer interest, because the premise of all marketing is that the consumer's need is sovereign, that the customer is always right, and this is precisely what the gospel insists cannot be the case.*

*We all have needs. Some people live with an aching sense of emptiness, a sense that things have gone awry; some are crushed by a burden of guilt, by pain that won't go away; some live in dread of what the future may hold; some long for friendship, a sense of belonging. There are needs like these in every pew in every church. But God does not want us to interpret the meaning of these needs ourselves because, being sinners, we resist seeing such needs in terms of our broken and violated relationship with him. Christ's gospel calls sinners to surrender their self-centeredness, to stop granting sovereignty to their own needs and recognize his claim of sovereignty over their lives. This is the reversal, the transposition of loyalties that is entailed in all genuine Christian believing. Barna's program inverts this basic truth; it is the antithesis of the biblical affirmation that the church will grow only through greater fidelity to the radical commands of the gospel--commands that God himself authorized to challenge all of our natural expectations. In order to market the church, Barna must obscure its essential reality. It has to be marketed as an organization rather than an organism, as a place to meet people rather than as the place where one meets God on terms that he establishes, as a commodity for consumption rather than an authority calling for penitence and surrender.<sup>74</sup>*

Two final ironies are worth noting here. The first irony is that many critics use the example of Jesus' approach to the rich, young ruler and contrast it with the way they perceive seeker churches would relate to the Yuppie, the boomer, the Buster, or other modern equivalents. Douglas Webster is an example: ". . . The important thing for us to see is that Jesus did not accommodate the gospel to this man's expectations. Far from appealing to the consummate consumer, the self-

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<sup>69</sup> Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 294-296.

<sup>70</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 67.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>72</sup> "The Cambridge Declaration," 4-5.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Jesus was rudely interrupted with a request to help settle a family financial dispute in Luke 12:13-21. He refused to be drawn in and instead addressed the issue of being rich toward God.

<sup>74</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 82.

made success and the imperial self, Jesus made it painfully clear that all that had to go.”<sup>75</sup> The irony of using this example frequently to point an accusing finger at the seeker church is that it was that very message that convinced me Willow Creek was a church with an ability to speak to today’s unchurched people with Biblical power and clarity. When I started attending in 1983, Bill Hybels gave a message entitled “What Would God Say to a Yuppie?” drawn from this very passage of Scripture. I was astounded by the way Hybels related to his whole audience, by the clear Biblical message, and by the uncompromising challenge to Christian discipleship that ended the message. I do not think I had ever heard a message that honored Biblical truth in such a powerful way with direct relevance to the lives of unchurched suburbanites in Chicago in the 1980’s. His critics could learn more than they acknowledge. The second irony is that though many of the critics rightly point out that wanting to please our hearers is wrong in the seeker church they seem to overlook the same tendency in the traditional church. Thus, it is just as possible that a pastor or author critical of the seeker church movement will preach and write for the “consumers” in his church or group when he “thunders against worldliness” in the seeker church in order to be affirmed by his supporters. Wanting to please our hearers is a symptom of fallen human nature not a problem peculiar to seeker church leaders.

### Do Seeker Churches Practice The Priority Of Second Things First?

All of the concerns in this chapter are symptoms of a deeper problem that affects churches of all types. This malady could be described as the priority of “second things first”—where marketing and management tools and techniques replace God himself in guiding the church. Expressed another way it is the problem of incomplete foundations. It stems from a profound misunderstanding of how God calls the church to its mission. It is compounded by the temptation to let methodology replace what God is trying to say to the church. The result is the displacement of God-centered truth in favor of church-growth “insights.” In the words of Sally Morgenthaler: “. . . increasingly, the winning approach to ministry is this: If you know enough about the problems, if you are privy to just the right solutions, and if you are talented and brave enough to carry out those solutions, your ministry will succeed. Or put another way, the success or failure of American Christianity hangs on the church’s knowledge, competence, and bravado.”<sup>76</sup> The point here is that most are not caught up in this out of a desire to please men more than God. Nor are the seeker churches walking in more doctrinal compromise than traditional churches who rarely share the gospel with non-believers. Rather it is because many, in their zeal to reach the world, have turned to second-things first. As Michael Horton reminds us: “The problem is not with secular literature, but with allowing secular wisdom priority in defining theological beliefs and the spiritual diet of Christian reflection. In fact, secular wisdom is most dangerous not when it comes in a very clearly marked package (i.e., *The Works of Plato*, *The Writings of Nietzsche*, *An Introduction to Modern Existentialism*, etc.), but when we naively baptize secular wisdom that we have received second- or third-hand with Bible verses in an effort to be ‘relevant.’”<sup>77</sup> Consequently, some have failed to listen carefully to God in implementing what he wants them to do. It is because they are excited about a methodology without a deep grasp of the Biblical principles driving the methodology and the Person who wants to go with them. They have embraced a strategy without a profound belief that Almighty God himself is calling them to such. The words of the Cambridge Declaration say it well:

*Wherever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: our interests have displaced God’s and we are doing his work in our way. The loss of God’s centrality in the life of today’s church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful. As a result, God, Christ and the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us. God does not exist to satisfy human ambitions, cravings, the appetite for consumption, or our own private spiritual interest. We must focus on God in our worship, rather than the satisfaction of our personal needs. God is sovereign in worship; we are not. Our concern must be for God’s kingdom, not our own empires, popularity or success.*<sup>78</sup>

All of the above concerns find their expression (or lack of it) in one area of the church’s life. When I go to the doctor I may have an ailment almost anywhere in my body but he always asks me to stick out my tongue. Apparently, an examination of the tongue reveals most about the health of the patient. Similarly, an examination of the church’s “tongue”—its practice of prayer in talking and listening to God—reveals all. Prayer is an area that can be slowly eroded from the

<sup>75</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 68. Norman Anderson is another example. He asks, “Have we succumbed to the pragmatism of market-driven ministry, and sacrificed truth in order to attract people? Do we cater to the sociological characteristics of baby-boomers and baby busters, and fail to preach Christ’s hard teachings of what it means to follow him? Are we so desirous the young ruler would not walk away that we compromise the message?” Anderson, “Church Growth Movement,” 99.

<sup>76</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 35.

<sup>77</sup> Horton, *Where in the World is the Church?* 59.

<sup>78</sup> “The Cambridge Declaration,” 9-10.

foundations of a seeker church. This happens often because everyone is so busy trying to meet the high expectations that have been set regarding ministry to seekers. Because the focus often becomes what a strategy of ministry or a program can do to reach seekers, we give lip service to coming before God for his direction and help. This is not a problem limited to seeker churches. I recall being at a seminar led by a renowned pastor from a traditional church who spoke warmly of the ministry of Charles Simeon and of his impact on the church and on society. His point was that Simeon led the church by being devoted to prayer and the teaching of God's Word. However, most of the seminar was devoted to what tools we could use to build better churches. Ironically, the church I serve is years ahead in its use of modern methods, yet we don't put emphasis on the significance of the methods. To clarify my concerns, I sat next to this leader over lunch and listened as he advocated that we as leaders need to spend more time becoming knowledgeable on paradigm shifts, the philosophy of teams, organizational methods for re-engineering the church, techniques and tools for interviewing prospective staff. I even asked how then do we as leaders use modern techniques yet lead our people in hearing from God through prayer and study of God's Word. I attempted to raise questions that would have allowed the discussion to be framed in terms of listening to God as Simeon would have propounded. Every question was answered in terms of technique, tools, and methods such as "choose people on staff who complement your Myers-Briggs personality type." No mention was made of the place of prayer and fasting in choosing leaders as a priority over tools and techniques. The question of how we modeled good leadership practices ignored the priority of prayer. This experience, multiplied dozens of times over, has convinced me the church is heading in a dangerous direction. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I have a business background; I am aware of and use many of the same tools that were being suggested. It would be foolish to completely discard insights from personality tests. But it is sad to hear seasoned leaders give priority to second things first.

### Is The Seeker Church "In The World" Or "Of The World"?

The tension between Biblical purity and cultural relevance described in the last two chapters is well summarized by Michael Horton, "... this is my Father's world yet this world is not my home."<sup>79</sup> Os Guinness describes the tension as he traces it through church history:

*... Origen, in the third century A.D. taught that Christians are free to "plunder the Egyptians" but forbidden to "set up a golden calf" from the spoils. "In/ not of," "no longer/ not yet," "free to utilize/ forbidden to idolize"--each contrast expresses the critical tension with the world that we are required to maintain. This tension is simultaneously a sign of obedience and a source of strength, a leading distinctive and a leading dynamic. It is what makes Christians the world's "resident aliens" (Augustine). It is what puts us in the challenging position of being "against the world for the world" (The Hartford Declaration). . .*

*... Lack of discernment here often prevents Christians from noticing crucial shifts in logic: from is to ought, from description to prescription, and most commonly from statements of description ("This is the way modern people are . . .") to statements of explanation ("This is why modern people are the way they are . . .") and statements of solution ("This is the way to deal with modern people because of the way they are . . .").*

*... On the one hand, in searching for the best, we should ask: where are modern insights and tools legitimate and fruitful? (Because all truth is God's truth, we are free to plunder.) On the other hand, in looking out for the worst, we should ask: where are modern insights and tools double-edged? (Because they contain negative and positive aspects, unintended and intended consequences.) Where are they excessive? (Because useful though they may be, it is possible to trust in them inordinately, making them either unbalanced or unbounded.) Where are they autonomous? (Because their very brilliance and effectiveness encourages us to treat them separately from other moral, human and theological considerations.) And finally, where are they idolatrous? (Not because the insights and tools are inherently evil, but because--through their very usefulness--they can be points of false reliance and even working substitutes for God.)<sup>80</sup>*

This tension can be held in balance only with a strong commitment to God and Scripture. John Seel reminds us: "If evangelicalism is to remain a viable religious community under these conditions, it must first engage in serious self-examination so as to become again people who are serious about the first things of the gospel."<sup>81</sup> David Wells may be amiss in the *application* of many of the criticisms of his book *God in the Wasteland*, indiscriminately to the seeker church, but his main point about the "weightlessness of God" in the modern world is well taken:

*Indeed, our generation is rapidly growing deaf to the summons of the external God. He has been so internalized, so tamed by the needs of religious commerce, so submerged beneath the traffic of modern psychological need that he has almost completely disappeared. All too often, he now leans weakly on the church, a passive bystander, a co-conspirator in the effort to dismantle two thousand years of Christian thought about God and what he has declared himself to be. That is to say, God has become weightless. The church continues its business of satisfying the needs of the self--needs defined by the individual--and God, who is himself viewed and marketed as a product, becomes powerless*

<sup>79</sup> Horton, *Where in the World is the Church?* 51.

<sup>80</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 30-33.

<sup>81</sup> Seel, "Modernity and Evangelicals," in *Faith and Modernity*, 309.

*to change the definition of that need or to prescribe the means by which it might be satisfied. When the consumer is sovereign, the product (in this case God himself) must be subservient.*<sup>82</sup>

Wells breathes a note of hope into his otherwise pessimistic analysis with the observation that:

*Addiction to modernity can be resisted by a strong and passionate mind that has been shaped by God's Word of truth and infused with a due sense of what is right. In short, the one sure defense against modernity's conquest of the church is God. As mighty as modernity is, God is mightier yet, and though the embrace of the modern world is strong and extensive, it is still possible, by the grace of God, to evade it. The power and seductiveness of modernity do not impede God one bit in actualizing his truth in the church, introducing his character into the lives of ordinary men and women, realizing his saving purposes in the world, and exercising providential control over its direction and outcomes.*<sup>83</sup>

However, until Christ comes we face several choices in mission given the effects of modernity: Are we to lament changes in the culture and demand that seekers hear our message using our preference for yesterdays cultural medium? Are we to insist on using the cultural style of a (questionably) more Christian era, even when seekers don't relate to it? Are we to try to change the culture before reaching seekers? Or are we to change the cultural preferences of a seeker before sharing the gospel? Or do we reach seekers in the cultural milieu and idiom with which they are familiar so we can challenge and change them and the culture? This last suggestion is nearest to the Biblical ideal--we need to be "against the world for the world."

Joseph Aldrich in his book *Lifestyle Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries To Reach The Unbelieving World*, would call this the balance between cultural identification and critical transcendence. We can use his analysis of the believer's efforts in personal evangelism to apply to the church's use of cultural relevance for the purpose of effective evangelism (see Figure 2):

*A balance between critical transcendence—radical difference—and concerned cultural participation—radical identification must be maintained. If the vertical dimension is neglected, one faces the temptation of becoming a cultural immersionist: a believer whose actions and thoughts are no different than those of a non-believer. If the horizontal dimension is neglected, one faces the temptation of becoming a cultural rejectionist: a believer who has no identification with the society in which he lives. The key seems to be maintaining a balance between the believer's radical difference and his radical identification. Our radical difference is holiness . . . Although our Lord expects communication without contamination, we cannot communicate effectively without contact, identification.*<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 101.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Aldrich, *Lifestyle Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries To Reach The Unbelieving World* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1981), 64

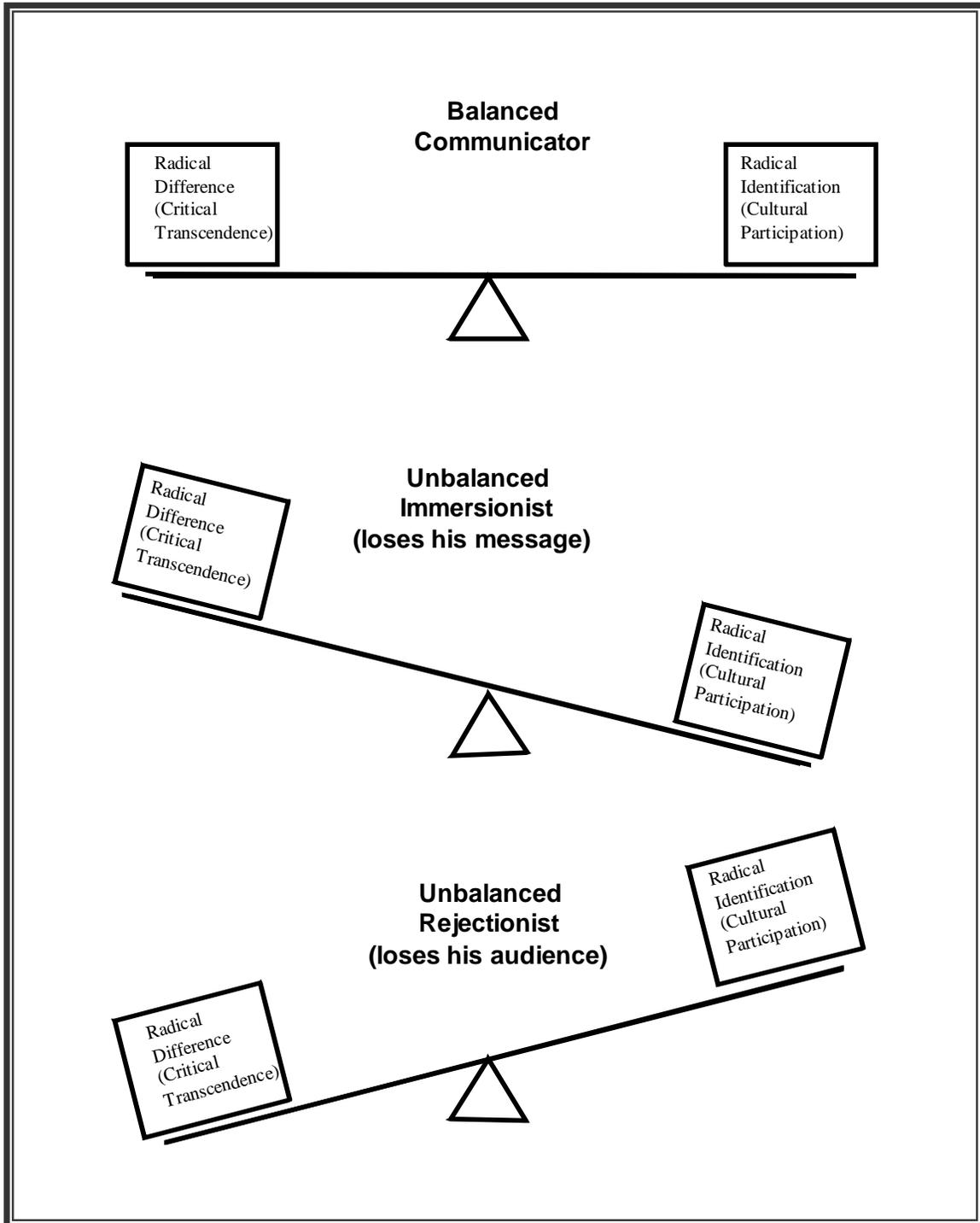


Figure 2. *Balanced Communication*

Where there is a strong and authentic commitment to the first things of the gospel, it will be matched by a strong and authentic commitment to evangelistic effectiveness in the increasingly unchurched modern world. The Lausanne Committee in The Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture has addressed the issue as one of “missionary humility.” This is not something that is needed or can be switched on when we go overseas; it is needed whenever taking the gospel to the culture of the unchurched. Under the heading “Wanted: Humble Messengers of the Gospel!” the Willowbank Report suggests five factors in “missionary humility”:

*First, there is the humility to acknowledge the problem which culture presents, and not to avoid or over-simplify it. Secondly, there is the humility to take to trouble to understand and appreciate the culture of those to whom we go. Thirdly, there is the humility to begin our communication where people actually are and not where we would like them to be. To begin where people are not is to share an irrelevant message; to stay where people are and never lead them on to the fullness of God's good news, is to share a truncated gospel. Fourthly, there is the humility to recognize that even the most gifted, dedicated and experienced missionary can seldom communicate the gospel in another language or culture as effectively as a trained local Christian. Fifthly, there is the humility to trust in the Holy Spirit of God, who is always the chief communicator, who alone opens the eyes of the blind and brings people to new birth. “Without his witness, ours is futile”<sup>85</sup>*

Citing Jesus’ incarnation as the greatest example of missionary humility, the report says, “Just so, Christ’s evangelists must humbly seek to empty themselves of all but their personal authenticity.”<sup>86</sup> As all of this relates to the forms of church services, again, the Willowbank Report offers a helpful suggestion—to see the issue as one of “dynamic equivalence”:

*Using the distinctions between “form” and “meaning”, and between “formal correspondence” and “dynamic equivalence,” which have been developed in translation theory . . . it is being suggested that an analogy may be drawn between Bible translation and church formation. “Formal correspondence” speaks of a slavish imitation, whether in translating a word into another language or exporting a church model to another culture. Just as a “dynamic equivalence” translation, however, seeks to convey to contemporary readers meanings equivalent to those conveyed to the original readers, by using appropriate cultural forms, so would a “dynamic equivalence” church. It would look in its culture as a good Bible translation looks in its language. It would preserve the essential meanings and functions which the New Testament predicated of the church, but would seek to express these in forms equivalent to the originals but appropriate to the local culture.*

*It rightly looks to the New Testament for the principles of church formation, rather than to either tradition or culture, and it equally rightly looks to the local culture for the appropriate forms in which these principles should be expressed.<sup>87</sup>*

## Conclusion

Seeker churches that value cultural relevance and want to relate to the modern world will be tempted to use managerial, therapeutic, and marketing tools and categories. The overuse of these tools of modernity is a serious problem for the seeker church as it is for the larger evangelical church. Too much dependence on these tools can replace the first priority of the things of the Gospel. The concern of the critics is that God and Scripture no longer are the source of authority and sufficiency for the church. Being a culturally relevant seeker church, though, does not necessitate the use or abuse of these tools. If the seeker church sees itself as “in the world. . .but not of the world” and views its engagement with the world as a missionary encounter it should be protected from the worst excesses of the tools of modernity.

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<sup>85</sup> “Willowbank,” 16-17.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 18. From Lausanne Covenant para. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 24.

## CHAPTER 6

### CHALLENGES FOR THE SEEKER CHURCH: THE CENTRALITY OF GOD AND SCRIPTURE

*“When the true story gets told, whether in the partial light of historical perspective or in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century has been the trivialization of God.” Donald McCullough<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

Many critics claim that seeker churches, as a part of the evangelical movement, have shifted from the foundations of the centrality of God and Scripture laid by previous generations of leaders. Some see the problems with seeker churches as part of the problem of the larger evangelical movement—the use of methodologies severed from dependence on God. As Os Guinness puts it, “Know-whom has faded before know-how.”<sup>2</sup>

A question raised by many critics and one that needs to be answered by seeker church leaders is, “What is the source of authority for the methods and message of the seeker church?” Repeatedly the charge is made that God and his word have been relegated to a secondary place. That these charges are being made is not surprising—historically any new ministry goes through a process of rejection by the religious establishment; that they should be lightly dismissed by seeker church leaders would be unwise. This chapter will look at the place of God and Scripture in the methods, message, and evangelistic ministry of seeker churches.

#### **Are God And Scripture Foundational To The Method Of Seeker Churches?**

As was argued in earlier chapters the character of the church is shaped by its main event; it should also be said that the character of the church is shaped by its source of truth. The main event and all the ministries of a seeker church should be shaped by God and Scripture more than the culture and tools of modernity or even the methods and strategies of the megachurches. If the source of truth to which a church turns is in practice something other than the Word of God that church is in danger.

In his book, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*, Donald McCullough observes: “When the true story gets told, whether in the partial light of historical perspective or in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century has been the trivialization of God.”<sup>3</sup> MacArthur clarifies that his concern is not with relevance per se but, “. . . with a philosophy that relegates God and His Word to a subordinate role in the church.”<sup>4</sup>

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals lament the sociological foundations that now replace the church’s Biblical authority for its methodology. Under the heading “Sola Scriptura: The Erosion Of Authority” they say this: “Scripture alone is the inerrant rule of the church’s life, but the evangelical church today has separated Scripture from its authoritative function. In practice, the church is guided, far too often, by the culture. Therapeutic technique, marketing strategies, and the beat of the entertainment world often have far more to say about what the church wants, how it functions and what it offers, than does the Word of God.”<sup>5</sup>

David Wells is perhaps the most ardent advocate of the need for the church to return the centrality of God and Scripture in its methods. Although addressed to the modern evangelical church at large his comments are worth weighing by seeker churches:

*Recent proposals for church reform have rarely amounted to anything more than diversions. They tend, in fact, to lead the church away from what it needs most to confront. They suggest that its weakness lies in the fact that its routines are too old, its music is too dull, its programs too few, its parking lots too small, its sermons too sermonic. They suggest that the problems are all administrative or organizational, matters of style or comfort. That is precisely what one would expect to surface in an age that is deeply pragmatic and fixated*

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<sup>1</sup> McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hourglass Books, 1994), 59.

<sup>3</sup> McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, xviii-xix.

<sup>5</sup> “The Cambridge Declaration,” 4.

on image rather than substance. Real reform will have to look beneath the surface to see the poverty of spirit in the evangelical world, its lack of seriousness, its tendency to engage in superficial rather than penetrating analyses, its childish inability to withstand the diversions of flash, fun, and glamor. God now rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His Word, if it is preached at all, does not summon enough. His Christ, if he is seen at all, is impoverished, thin, pale, and scarcely capable of inspiring awe, and his riches are entirely searchable. If God is at the center of the worship, one has to wonder why there is so much surrounding the center that is superfluous to true worship--indeed, counterproductive to it. It is God that the church needs most--God in his grace and truth, God in his awesome and holy presence, not a folder full of hot ideas for reviving the church's flagging programs. But this is what makes the reform of the church so profoundly difficult. Church facilities, landscaping programs, and liturgies can all be changed--changed overnight and changed over and over again. The human heart cannot be so easily changed.<sup>6</sup>

### **What Factors Influence The Methodology Of Seeker Churches?**

Some seeker church leaders are influenced by the success of the megachurches and, despite advice to the contrary, merely copy their methods. They implement what flagship seeker church leaders say and write about as the source of guidance for the church without filtering their advice through the guidance for the church found in Scripture itself.

Some seeker churches also imagine they have a Biblical theology of ministry by taking secular wisdom and propping it up with Biblical proof-texts rather than by giving theology priority in defining the philosophy of ministry of the church. Others let sociological data drive the decisions and ministries of the church. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals has described the problem well: "Many in the church growth movement believe that a sociological understanding of those in the pew is as important to the success of the gospel as is the biblical truth which is proclaimed. As a result, theological convictions are frequently divorced from the work of the ministry. The marketing orientation in many churches takes this even further, erasing the distinction between the biblical Word and the world, robbing Christ's cross of its offense, and reducing Christian faith to the principles and methods which bring success to secular corporations."<sup>7</sup>

### **Is Theology The Decisive Authority For The Methodology Of Seeker Churches?**

Seeker churches are influenced as part of the larger evangelical movement; David Wells points out that within this movement evangelical practice rather than profession is changing:

*... It is not that the elements of the evangelical credo have vanished; they have not. The fact that they are professed, however, does not necessarily mean that the structure of the historic Protestant faith is still intact. The reason, quite simply, is that while these items of belief are professed, they are increasingly being removed from the center of evangelical life where they defined what that life was, and they are now being relegated to the periphery where their power to define what evangelical life should be is lost. This is not the sort of shift that typical polling will discover, for these items of belief are seldom denied or qualified, but that does not mean that the shift has not occurred. It is evangelical practice rather than evangelical profession that reveals the change.<sup>8</sup>*

In light of this Wells suggests that there are now two quite different models of ministry in the church today:

*... In the model of the Church that has its roots in the Reformation and in the Puritanism that followed, theology is essential and central; in its modern-day evangelical descendants, however, theology is often only instrumental and peripheral. In the one, theology provides the culture in which ministry is understood and practiced; in the other, this culture is provided by professionalization.*

*The difference between the two models is not that theology is present in one but not the other. Theology is professed and believed in both. But in the one, theology is the reason for ministry, the basis for ministry; it provides the criteria by which success in ministry is measured. In the other, theology does none of these things; here the ministry provides its own rationale, its own criteria, its own techniques. The second model does not reject theology; it simply displaces it so that it no longer gives the profession of ministry its heart and fire.*

*What this means in practice is that the minister, like a small boat cast loose upon the high seas, has become vulnerable to a multitude of perils. Within the Church, strong winds are blowing from a range of religious consumers who look to the churches and ministers to meet their needs--and who quickly look elsewhere if they feel those needs are not being met. Basically, these consumers are looking for the sort of thing the self-movement is offering; they just want it in evangelical dress. A genuinely biblical and God-centered ministry is almost certain to collide head-on with the self-absorption and anthropocentric focus that are now normative in so many evangelical churches.<sup>9</sup>*

John Armstrong also reminds us of the Reformation principle of Sola Scriptura and warns that many evangelicals are now departing from it:

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<sup>6</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 224-225.

<sup>7</sup> "The Cambridge Declaration," 8.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-56.

*This truth is well stated in an often quoted section of a famous confession: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deducted from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap 1, Section VI, M4)*

*The point of all of this is to affirm that Scripture is the only source and norm for all distinctly Christian knowledge. . . .  
. . . a number of new authorities threaten modern evangelicalism directly. These authorities are often grounded in what the above confession calls “custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgements . . . or visions, or miracles,” and they must be challenged when they stand against the authority of the Word and Gospel of Christ. . . .*

*. . . What has been missed is that they do not generally treat Scripture, at least practically, as if it is the sole, authoritative rule of faith and practice.<sup>10</sup>*

The application of this principle does not require a total dismissal of any counsel from any source other than the Bible, only that such counsel not be foundational. John MacArthur reminds us that some insights are useful but cannot be essential if we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture:

*Useful, perhaps. Necessary, no. If they are necessary, they are in Scripture. Otherwise, God has left us short of what we need, and that would be unthinkable. Human ingenuity occasionally intersects with truth. Even a stopped clock is right twice a day. But that is poor performance compared to Scripture, which is true in all its assertions and sufficient for the life and growth of the church . . . Certainly, there is nothing wrong with a pastor reading secular books on relationships or management and implementing a helpful suggestion he might find there. But if he is studying such things because he thinks he might uncover some great, indispensable secret Scripture doesn’t reveal about how to cure the ills of the soul or how to lead a church, then he has a low view of the Bible’s sufficiency. If he bases his work on the secular suggestions, he will probably devise an unbiblical system of evangelism, counseling, and church leadership.<sup>11</sup>*

Wells chides those who would turn to modernity and its tools to guide the church, “It is almost as if when God inspired His Word, He unfortunately did not see what was coming in later twentieth-century America and so He left us a Bible that has proved somewhat inadequate for the managing and sustaining of His people.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Responses To Concerns About The Method Of Seeker Churches***

The flagship churches do try to teach the foundational role that God and theology ought to play in the methodology of seeker churches. Rick Warren in particular, through his *Purpose Driven Church* book and conferences, offers a practical strategy for the church based on solid theological foundations. Willow Creek also points to the necessity of theology in shaping the church and its ministries:

*The goal of our teaching is not only the transformation of individual lives, but also the transformation of the church. Anointed biblical teaching can move an entire body of believers toward becoming a biblically functioning community.*

*Anointed biblical teaching can build unity among the congregation and provide a sense of God’s presence and guidance as the church gathers together under the teaching of His Word. It can impact structure, polity, methodology, vision, values and strategy. Anointed biblical teaching has the power to bring about change, transforming a local body of believers into a dynamic community where pursuing lost people is a priority, spiritual gifts are actively employed and God’s grace is celebrated.<sup>13</sup>*

Bill Hybels was asked in a Christianity Today interview, “If you could say anything to the leaders of other seeker-oriented churches, what would it be?” He answered: “I would just tell them to preach the Scriptures unapologetically, to hold very close to the Acts 2 definition of a biblically functioning community, and to concentrate more on being the church than building great buildings.”<sup>14</sup> In practice, this message is not always communicated well and is not getting through to some seeker church leaders who are building on different foundations.

Willow Creek Community Church can unintentionally give the impression that it is more important for seeker churches to learn what happened to the church at Willow Creek through their church leadership conferences than to learn what happened to the church at Jerusalem through the book of Acts. A subtle tendency to promote the success of the methods and strategies before the supernatural resources—God’s Spirit, God’s Word, and God’s people—still affects many

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong, *Evangelical Crisis*, 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Wells, “Marketing the Church,” 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Olsson, “Defining a Movement,” 2.

<sup>14</sup> Hybels, “Selling Out the House of God?” 25.

ardent proponents of Willow Creek's success.<sup>15</sup> Questions that seeker church leaders need to ask are, "Do we draw the church's attention back to the foundation of God and God's Word? Do we draw more attention to the Biblical ideal for the church as found in Scripture or more attention to ourselves as the ideal?" Willow Creek stands as a powerful example of what God can do today; it is worth learning from to the extent that its "success" is seen to be related to a radical obedience by God's people to God and the principles of his Word.

While most seeker churches are attempting to build on the solid foundations of God and Scripture, nevertheless they would still benefit from reflecting on the warnings of the critics. For some seeker church leaders, dependence on methods, tools, secular wisdom, and the practice of the flagship seeker churches can result in a subtle dismissal of theology. As Guinness says, ". . . methodology is at the center and in control. The result is a methodology only occasionally in search of a theology."<sup>16</sup> Guinness also asks: ". . . is the church of Christ primarily guided and shaped by its own character and calling--or by considerations and circumstances alien to itself? Or, to put the question differently, is the church of Christ a social reality truly shaped by a theological cause, namely the Word and Spirit of God? In sum, what--in practice--is the church's decisive authority? . . . Behind this question lies the fact that the church of God "lets God be God" and is the church only when she lives and thrives finally by God's truth and God's resources."<sup>17</sup>

It is also clear that in the seeker church movement the apparent "success" of the main churches creates a momentum on some issues that overrides theology as the decisive authority. For example, Willow Creek takes an egalitarian position on women in the church, teaching and enforcing within their own church the view that all leadership roles are appropriate for both genders; they also promote this view at some Willow Creek Association events. Many evangelicals within the movement agree that women ought to have greater freedom in ministry opportunities according to spiritual gifts. But they also have Biblical convictions that the roles of elder and pastor are limited to men, however counter-cultural that may seem. Many who held such a view have now adapted to Willow Creek's position. In several cases of which I am aware this is not out of a deep and rigorous study of Scripture but because Willow Creek has legitimized it. The willingness to change comes from a lack of attention to Scripture, a perception that it is working for Willow Creek (pragmatism) and the cultural pressure, from within and without the congregation, to accept it.<sup>18</sup>

In fairness to the seeker church movement, comment must be made that some critics make sweeping applications of their criticisms to all seeker churches. Often their theological arguments are correct but their indiscriminating application is wrong. Many of the critics also seem predisposed to reject the benefits of seeker church methods even when built on solid theological foundations. Those who cite the "regulative principle" (nothing should be used in the church that is not prescribed in God's Word) also use it to suit their arguments, taking it to an extreme in applying it to seeker churches but conveniently ignoring it when it would prescribe changes in their own methodology. For instance, some believe drama is excluded based on the regulative principle but would happily include organ music. If the principle is to be applied consistently we would all be like denominations such as the "Wee Frees" in Scotland, singing the Psalter without music.<sup>19</sup> Robert Wenz puts a more balanced perspective on it; "That means a return to Scripture--not just as a source for illustrations in worship or support for the otherwise market-driven services, but as the formal principle from which we draw everything essential to our theory and practice."<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, it is clear that theology *can be* the decisive authority in a seeker church. If God and Scripture are foundational, rather than a methodology, nothing should be eliminated that is essential to the nature of a seeker church; it can be biblically pure and culturally relevant rather than culturally driven or seeker driven. For a seeker church to be truly effective, necessitates (not contradicts) that it be God-centered. The deeper we delve into the heart of God in worship and surrender the more we come away with a fresh commission to love the world as he does. We may then develop a plan to take God's love and God's Word to the world but it need not be that we will depend on a method or plan. It is wrong to assume that to have a clear strategy for ministry is to trust in a strategy. We can have total trust in God and yet still move

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<sup>15</sup> A W.C.A. staff member actually referred to W.C.A. member churches as 'franchises' of Willow Creek in a phone conversation with the author. While this is (hopefully) a minority view at the Association, it also seems to be reflected in the tendency of consultants and others working on behalf of the Association to think that what seeker churches need most is to be found at Willow Creek Community Church rather than in the Bible and among God's people.

<sup>16</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Some might say that this is what happens in traditional denominations also (although the WCA is not a denomination). Such an observation --and others like it made in defense of seeker churches by comparing them favorably to the weaknesses of traditional churches--still does not make it healthy for the seeker church.

<sup>19</sup> John MacArthur even acknowledges this. "Immediately practical questions arise about how sola Scriptura should be used to regulate worship. Some, for example, have tried to apply the principle-wrongly, I believe (cf. Ps. 150)--to rule out musical instruments in the church." Of course, he offers no guidelines for his arbitrary conclusions. John MacArthur, "How Shall We Then Worship?" *Voices*. Sept/Oct 1995, 7-9. See also the John MacArthur interview in *Leadership* described in Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> Wenz, *Room for God?* 10.

forward in ministry at his bidding with a plan. Bill Hull observes: “We should remember that although the Scriptures are inspired, theology is not. But our understanding of God and the absolutes of Scripture must drive the church. Rather than being a seeker-driven church, a market-driven church, or a need-driven church, we must seek to become a theologically driven church. Let Scripture and nothing else set our agenda. Then within the parameters of Scripture, let us touch and understand the market around us, the needs that confront us, and the society in which we live. Let’s remove our theology from our church closets, dust it off, breathe new life into it, and move forward with an eternal, objective, solid agenda.”<sup>21</sup> We shall now take a look at whether God and Scripture are foundational to the message of seeker churches.

## Are God And Scripture Foundational To ‘The Message’ Of Seeker Churches?

If seeker churches are to maintain Biblical purity they will also need to ensure that not only are they looking to God and Scripture for their methods but for their message. John MacArthur challenges: “There have always been those in the pulpit who gathered crowds because they are gifted orators, interesting storytellers, entertaining speakers, dynamic personalities, shrewd crowd-manipulators, rousing speech-makers, popular politicians, or erudite scholars. Such preaching may be *popular*, but it is not necessarily *powerful*. No one can preach with supernatural power who does not preach the Word. And no faithful preacher will water down or neglect the whole counsel of God. Proclaiming the Word—all of it—is the pastor’s calling.”<sup>22</sup> Remembering Marshall McLuhan’s dictum that “the medium is the message,” our understanding of “the message” needs to be expanded beyond the thirty minute teaching time during the service; the message is what is communicated through the whole service—intentionally and unintentionally.

### Do Seeker Churches Value Transcendence In Their ‘Message’?

The Cambridge Declaration laments the loss of God-centered worship in the contemporary evangelical church. Under the heading, *Soli Deo Gloria: The Erosion Of God-Centered Worship*, it states:

*Wherever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: our interests have displaced God’s and we are doing his work in our way. The loss of God’s centrality in the life of today’s church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful. As a result, God, Christ and the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us.*

*God does not exist to satisfy human ambitions, cravings, the appetite for consumption, or our own private spiritual interest. We must focus on God in our worship, rather than the satisfaction of our personal needs. God is sovereign in worship; we are not. Our concern must be for God’s kingdom, not our own empires, popularity or success.*<sup>23</sup>

Larry Crabb describes a trend toward quick answers to make life work—what he calls “recipe theology”—that is rapidly replacing “transcendent theology”: “*Transcendent theology*, which flows out of the big picture, has been replaced by *recipe theology*, a way of thinking that keeps its focus on the particulars of life. The center of transcendent theology is God, his character and purpose. The center of recipe theology is man, his needs and well-being.”<sup>24</sup> John Piper observes a trend in modern worship to be more God-focused (disagreeing with many critics of the seeker church who would discount such worship as trivial compared with older hymns). But he also laments the man-ward trend of much contemporary preaching. His comments are quoted at length here to ensure the point is made:

*So as we look at the “worship awakening” over the last twenty years or so, what stands out to me as astonishing is that its content is so God-centered and God-exalting. “He is Lord, risen from the dead”; “he is majestic”; “he is mighty”; “he is holy”; “he has conquered the power of death”; “he is a shield about us, our glory, the lifter of our heads”; “he is King of kings, Lord of lords, Emmanuel, great and wonderful, our Rock, our Fortress, our Deliverer, the coming King, Redeemer, Name above all names, precious Lamb of God, Messiah, Holy One”; “he is our God”; and “our God reigns.”*

*Whatever you think of the drums, the electric guitar and bass and amplification and T-shirts and platforms cluttered with wires and mikes and speakers, it is unmistakable the dominant theme of these songs is God—the character of God, the power of God, the mercy of God, the authority of God, and the fatherhood of God. And the hoped-for effect of relentlessly addressing God directly in the second person is engagement—genuine, real, spiritual engagement of the heart with God.*

*But there is another remarkable fact of the last twenty years or so, and it has to do with preaching. My observation is that the preaching that follows this music in most churches has moved in exactly the opposite direction from the musical worship awakening. While*

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<sup>21</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> MacArthur, *Asbamed of the Gospel*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> “The Cambridge Declaration,” 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 53.

*the worship songs have moved God-ward, preaching has moved man-ward. While the worship songs focus our attention again and again on the character of God and the great works of God, preaching focuses on contemporary issues, personal problems, relationships. While the worship songs lift us into the presence of God, preaching gives advice on how to get along better on earth. No one would say today the same thing about preaching that we have seen in the “worship awakening” namely, that there has been or a great resurgence of God-centeredness, or a great moving of the spirit of God-wardness in the pulpit, or a focus on God’s character and mighty acts in the preaching of evangelicalism. Rather, I think most would agree that preaching has moved in the other direction: a relational, anecdotal, humorous, casual, laid-back, absorbed in human need, fixated on relational dynamics, heavily saturated with psychological categories, wrapped up in strategies for emotional healing.*

*And right here many preachers, I fear, make a fateful, mistaken judgment. They reason: since I do not have music to accompany me in my preaching, I cannot, with a God-centered message, hold or move the hearts of my people and engage their emotions. Doctrine and theological portraits of God, a focus on his supremacy and a spirit of transcendence will simply not hold and move a contemporary audience-not without music to sustain the mood. What holds a contemporary audience verbally is not a message about God but a message about divorce or drugs or parenting or anger or success or abuse or intimacy or depression.*

*In other words, the common strategy of preachers today for awakening people’s emotions and engaging their hearts is to find the areas of human life where the emotions are already running high and where the hearts are already engaged; and then we root the sermon there: the pain in the marriage; the anguish of wayward teenagers; the stress at work; the power of sexual temptation; the breakdown of community; the woundedness of past abuses; the absence of intimacy and vulnerability. We preachers know that if we plant our sermons here-if we tend this garden with modest skill in anecdote and illustration and personal vulnerability-we will move the hearts of our hearers; we will accomplish what the worship tunes accomplish. Our listeners will experience the good feelings of empathy, and we will feel the satisfaction of attentive, resonating faces.*

*Now at this point I could put either a positive or a negative spin on this development in preaching. Positively, I could say: a lot of preaching is in touch with where people are and where they feel pain, and that is certainly not a bad thing. Preaching that is ignorant of people and unempathetic with their pain will not bear biblical fruit.*

*But there is also a negative spin that we can put on this development-one that I do indeed put on it, and one that helps explain my burden in these lectures. It is this: the reason we preachers do not believe that the greatness of God, the spirit of transcendence, the glory and majesty of Christ, the deep things of the Spirit, will move the hearts of our people and awaken profound affections is that these things do not move us; they don’t awaken our affections. We preachers prefer to read books about anger and intimacy and marriage and success and all manner of how-to strategies for home and church, than to read books about God. Ask any publisher what sells—even to pastors.*

*What gets preachers’ juices flowing is a new psychological angle on family dysfunction; a new strategy for mobilizing lay people; a new tactic for time management; a fresh approach to dealing with depression; an empathetic focus on his own resentments and pain and anger after years of being beat up by carnal Christians. But not a book about God. Not the infinite expanse of God’s character. Not the inexhaustible riches of the glory of God in Christ.*

*I don’t think that this tension between God-focused worship lyrics and human-focused preaching can go on indefinitely. Either the God-centered worship singing will be pulled down, or the human-saturated preaching will be pulled up.*

*The aim of preaching, whatever the topic, whatever the text, is this kind of faith—to quicken in the soul a satisfaction with all that God is for us in Jesus, because this satisfaction magnifies God’s all sufficient glory; and that is worship. Therefore the mission of all preaching is soul-satisfying, God-exalting worship.*

*The aim of preaching is worship. That is, all preaching should aim to wean the human heart off the breast of sin and bring it to satisfaction in God as the Fountain of Life. The assumption here is this: God is most glorified in our people when our people are most satisfied in him. That is, the essence and heart of worship is being satisfied with all that God is for us in Christ.<sup>25</sup>*

Robert Wenz also argues for “worship preaching” as a category that puts the focus on God:

*If we think again of the three primary ministries of the church—worship, discipleship, and evangelism—we must wonder why only two kinds of preaching dominate. Preaching most often takes place in a worship service, but rarely does the preaching relate to the context itself-worship. . . . Worship preaching is theological preaching that focuses on God, his character, his attributes, his person, his acts, and his glory. Worship is not always strictly practical and relevant. In fact, practicality and relevance are at times obstacles to worship because they maintain our focus on the things of this world rather than on the eternal kingdom.<sup>26</sup>*

Unfortunately, even in the traditional church too much attention is given to “good teaching” that we have forgotten the purpose of teaching—to lead us to God. A. W. Tozer reminds us: “For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they

<sup>25</sup> Piper, “Preaching as Worship,” 29-45.

<sup>26</sup> Wenz, *Room for God?* 154.

may enter into Him, that they may delight in his Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***Do Seeker Churches Affirm Biblical Preaching And Teaching in Their ‘Message’?***

Many critics claim the seeker church movement has moved away from the centrality of Biblical preaching. This has happened, the critics say, as a result of the drive for cultural relevance and the use of contemporary methods in communicating the gospel, particularly drama, media and contemporary music. They particularly lament the loss of verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture. Other critics feel Biblical preaching and teaching has been diminished by the role of small group ministry emphasis in most seeker churches elevating caring and sharing at the expense of proclaiming. All of this is seen to undermine the centrality of Biblical preaching and teaching. Seeker churches are also accused of attempts to emphasize relevance at the expense of truth. Complaining of speakers who emphasize application over interpretation John MacArthur says, “There is no danger of irrelevant doctrine; the real threat is an undoctrinal attempt at relevance.”<sup>28</sup>

### ***Do Seeker Churches View The Bible As Authoritative In Their ‘Message’?***

It might be possible to assume that all seeker churches value anointed preaching. One of the core values of the Willow Creek Association is: “We believe that anointed teaching is the catalyst for transformation in individuals’ lives and in the church.”<sup>29</sup> But it is important to ask, “Is the content of the teaching at seeker churches Biblical?” My impression is that some seeker churches are unintentionally moving away from the Bible as their source of authority and do so as they engage in a number of compromises in the name of cultural relevance that relegate the Word of God in the teaching ministry of the church. These are potential compromises for all seeker churches and an awareness of them is the first step in maintaining Biblical purity.

#### *Is Theology Treated Dismissively?*

The first potential compromise is to treat theology dismissively. Part of the reason why the Bible is losing its influence as a source of authority in seeker services is that in some contemporary churches it is popular to try to relate to the crowd by denigrating theology. Bill Hull laments this tendency:

*We live in a very dangerous time for evangelicals. When the word theology is used in a local church, it is usually referred to negatively, or at least people are encouraged to yawn. Those who speak negatively of theology believe that by so doing they can become relevant to the unreached. With the best of intentions, I believe, they are attempting to break out of the institutional parameters that hold the church back from effective outreach. They would say that while theology is needed, very few in the church care about it, and certainly the unchurched have no interest in our theology. Such leaders make a very convincing argument: They are trying to meet the needs of hurting people, and since theology seems irrelevant to these people, it can be ignored.*

*. . . The only way to be relevant on an ongoing basis is to have an eternal message. The basis of that eternal message, founded on absolute truth, is called theology<sup>30</sup>*

R. C. Sproul makes the same point in a chapter entitled The Object of Contemporary Relevance in Michael Horton’s book *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*:

*Part of our problem is the disdain for theology that abounds in Christian circles. Although theology is taken from two words that, together, mean “the study of God,” many brothers and sisters prefer shortcuts to “relevance.” To say that theology is boring is really to say that God is boring. And yet, part of the problem is that the average person in the pew is not likely to get a steady diet of theology that is proclaimed with excitement and relevance. How can we think about God’s character and actions in history and yawn? Who would dare say that the God of the Bible is irrelevant for the modern world? The Creator of heaven and earth. The One who has all of history in His hand, the Lord of history, is relevant to everything we do. And yet people still find it boring to come into His presence for the purpose of adoration and reverence. Or is that the purpose of church anymore? Perhaps the shift from the character of God and His grace to attempts at relevance is to blame for boredom, as the excitement of last week’s meeting wears off by Monday.<sup>31</sup>*

<sup>27</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 69. Quoting A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982), 10.

<sup>28</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Olsson, “Defining a Movement,” 1.

<sup>30</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 49-51.

<sup>31</sup> Colson and Horton, *Power Religion*, 319.

### *Is The Bible Viewed As Sufficient And Effective Truth?*

The second potential compromise is when the Bible is no longer viewed as sufficient and effective truth. Douglas Webster observes:

*There are so many illustrations in today's market-sensitive sermons that the hearer forgets the biblical truth that is being illustrated; so many personal anecdotes that the hearer knows the pastor better than she knows Christ; so many human-interest stories that listening to the sermon is easier than reading the Sunday paper; so practical that there is hardly anything to practice.*

*No wonder nominal Christians leave church feeling upbeat. Their self-esteem is safely intact. Their minds and hearts have been sparked and soothed with sound-bite theology, Christian maxims and a few practical pointers dealing with self-esteem, kids or work. But the question remains: has the Word of God been effectively and faithfully proclaimed, penetrating comfort zones and the veneer of self-satisfaction with the truth of Jesus Christ?<sup>32</sup>*

If the Bible is not viewed as sufficient truth there is not only an unhealthy emphasis on methodology but the message of the gospel begins to undergo subtle changes. The Bible says that, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God *may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." These and other passages teach the power and sufficiency of the Word of God (see, for example, John 15:3; John 17:17; 1 Peter 1:23). If we believe that through obedience to Biblical teaching someone can be "thoroughly equipped for every good work" and that "it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" why would it not form the core of our teaching?

### *Is It Clear The Bible Is The Source Of The Message?*

The third potential compromise is to conceal the Bible as the source of the message. John Piper observes, "Just as there is a tendency today to take the glory of God for granted and to keep it in the basement as the assumed foundation for other topics, in the same way there is a similar tendency to hide the actual wording of the biblical text as the unseen foundation of the sermon."<sup>33</sup> As has already been noted, many seeker churches encourage believers not to carry Bibles so that when seekers turn up (without Bibles) the seeker will not feel embarrassed. In some seeker services pastors are eliminating the presence of a Bible altogether from the podium. Again, for a pure seeker event it may not matter that we necessarily carry a Bible to the podium whenever we speak; indeed it may help that we do not. But in a seeker service it is unnecessary to conceal the Bible as the source of the message from a true seeker. Worse still, many seeker church pastors undermine the authority of the Bible by minimizing Biblical references in preference to sources of authority more palatable to the seeker. When overdone, the benefits of cultural relevance in this case bring compromises of Biblical purity.

### *Does Relevance Clarify The Real Message Of The Bible?*

The fourth potential compromise is made when attempts at relevance confuse instead of clarify the real message of the Bible. This may not be intentional but is rather a by-product of misguided attempts at cultural relevance. Douglas Webster, like many critics, agrees that there is a need to relate the gospel carefully to modern audience but the content must not be diluted. "The case for sensitivity to the hearer is a strong one, and the case against religious jargon, pedantic and doctrinaire sermons, and history lessons in the pulpit is a necessary corrective. But an uncritical acceptance of an "accessibility strategy" can impair rather than enhance the proclamation of the gospel. It can dilute the truth rather than develop the truth in penetrating ways."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, John MacArthur challenges:

*Biblical preaching cannot be geared toward meeting felt needs, solving psychological problems, amusing the audience, making people feel good about themselves, or any of the other hollow fads that have commandeered pulpits in this entertainment-oriented age. Biblical preaching must uphold the truth of God and demand that it be heeded. There is plenty of room for innovation and creativity within those guidelines, but the message itself cannot be altered or abridged in any way without prostituting the church's responsibility. Truth proclaimed powerfully from the Scriptures is the sine qua non of the church. Any other preaching is not worthy of the church Christ is building.<sup>35</sup>*

When series titles read like the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and messages like *Readers Digest* articles with an occasional Bible footnote something has gone wrong. Such tactics may grab the interest of the seeker and get attention--the question many critics raise is what price do we pay for the attention. It is possible to use God, Bible verses and stories including Christ's life and teachings to lend credibility to another message. Michael Horton describes it well:

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<sup>32</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 83-84.

<sup>33</sup> John Piper, "Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation," *Trinity Journal* 16 NS, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 38.

<sup>34</sup> Webster, *Selling Jesus*, 107.

<sup>35</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 187-88.

*That means that the Bible is not principally concerned with organizing our schedule, giving us tips for winning in life and business, or with guiding us into self-fulfillment it is a story about God and His saving acts leading up to the cross, the Resurrection, and our Lord's return in order to make all things new. It is not about us, and it is not about our daily lives. It is about God and His redemptive activity in the daily lives of wandering Hebrews and first-century Palestinian Jews who were eyewitnesses to the resurrection of the God-Man . . .*

*Very often these days, the demand is overpowering for the "practical." If the modern man or woman is going to take the time to get up, dress the kids, and make it to church, it had better be relevant. But is this great redemptive story irrelevant? Have we reversed our definition of the trivial and the grand? Is the greatest story ever told now boring, since we cannot see how it can possibly make us feel good or advance our self-fulfillment over the next seventy-two hours? . . .*

*. . . A text may be printed in the bulletin, but Jesus just happens to sound a lot like Oprah Winfrey, and Paul coincidentally says basically the same things as Carl Rogers and Carl Carber. John sounds remarkably like Rush Limbaugh and, far from the traditional picture, Jeremiah is really concerned with offering us principles for handling stress. I realize that there is a bit of hyperbole here, but it makes the point. There is a familiar ring to everything, we hear because, in fact, we are hearing the popular culture fed back to us as the Word of God.<sup>36</sup>*

Horton speaks of "a rather common tendency in contemporary evangelicalism to demand that the Bible be 'relevant' by making it say things in which it does not have the slightest interest. We trivialize the Scriptures when we ignore its real message, which is doctrinal, and instead squeeze applications to daily life from verses that were never intended to yield quite so much 'relevant' data."<sup>37</sup>

#### *Are Hard Topics Avoided?*

The fifth potential compromise is to avoid hard topics. There is always a possibility that what one communicates could be shaped by the desire to be received well. Many critics claim this is what is happening in seeker churches. Willow Creek may well be one of the few seeker churches that do not avoid the hard issues but all seeker churches would have to honestly admit that the strategy of the ministry makes it uncomfortable to address subjects like hell, the final judgement, the end times, homosexuality, abortion, etc. John MacArthur clearly feels this is a necessary outcome of seeker ministry, "The pragmatism I see mitigates the confrontive character of the gospel. When the church becomes enamored with influence and image as the key to evangelism, it is no longer depending on Christ. Some churches think, If they really like us, they'll like Jesus. I'm not sure there's any correlation whatsoever."<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, in trying to relate to the seeker it is possible to want to change the message. Some seeker churches tend toward a view of God in which his primary attribute is benevolence. "In new-model theology God's primary attribute is benevolence. It overrides and supersedes His holiness, justice, wrath, and sovereignty. The new-model God is *judge* only in the sense of being a 'defender of His people.' His sole concern is 'the freedom and peace of the people.' Moreover, the new-model church is called not to confront the world, but 'to make known the love of God,' to say, 'your sins are forgiven,' as Jesus did, and to offer the resources of the Spirit to all who want to learn how to love and enjoy God and their neighbors."<sup>39</sup> Most seeker church messages do seem to have become focused on God's fatherly love more than God's judgement. There may be great challenges in communicating God's holiness, justice, wrath and sovereignty but we err if we strip God of those characteristics in a vain attempt to make him more palatable by emphasizing His benevolence. It takes a great deal of courage to bring the whole counsel of God to the church while at the same time trying to woo seekers to Christ.

David Wells diagnoses the problem of the modern church as being that God's holiness weighs lightly upon us. He ascribes the reasons for that to modernity, the consequent difficulty of teaching moral virtue and the subordination of God's holiness to God's love. He believes modern evangelicals now believe talk of "divine holiness is distracting or intrusive."

*Protestant liberalism pioneered this displacement of God's holiness in the nineteenth century, but in this century evangelicals have taken up with distressing carelessness the wholesale reordering of the Christian faith that it introduced, from the meaning of Christ's atonement to the meaning of Christian sanctification.*

*Today there is resistance to the tenet that has been most characteristic of Protestant thought since the earliest days of the Reformation namely, that holiness fundamentally defines the character of God and that love is not an alternative to it but, rather, an expression of it. . . . Holiness is what defines God's character most fundamentally, and a vision of this holiness should inspire his people and evoke their worship, sustain their character, fuel their passion for truth, and encourage persistence in efforts to do his will and call on his name in petitionary*

<sup>36</sup> Armstrong, *Evangelical Crisis*, 251,255.

<sup>37</sup> Horton, *Where in the World is the Church?* 195-96.

<sup>38</sup> MacArthur, "Our Sufficiency for Outreach," 137.

<sup>39</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 194.

prayer. . . .

. . . . *It is time to recover the biblical emphasis on the fact that God is in his very essence holy. The Bible “does not begin,” Carl Henry notes, “like liberal theology with an emphasis on divine love for the sinner to which divine wrath is and must be subordinated” it begins with God’s indignation at the Fall into sin, which was an expression of his holiness.*<sup>40</sup>

As Greg Pritchard puts it, “Willow Creek seeks to be relevant in presenting Christianity to unchurched Harry. The result is that unchurched Harry’s categories, language, and priorities shape the message of who God is.”<sup>41</sup> Pritchard considers Willow Creek to be a “cognitive minority” engaged in “cognitive bargaining” which results in “evangelical civility” as James Davison Hunter calls it. “Civility is most noticeable when those who have already accepted the Evangelical message interact with those being introduced to it. The civilizing process entails a deemphasis of Evangelicalism’s more offensive aspects: the notions of inherent evil, sinful conduct and lifestyles, the wrath of a righteous and jealous God, and eternal agony and death in hell. The deemphasis has been more quantitative than qualitative. The offensive elements are, in the main, neither substantively devalued nor glossed over as unimportant. They are simply not referred to as much as they have been in the past.”<sup>42</sup> Os Guinness warns, “Finally we will end up, as Niebuhr charged, as ‘a God without wrath (bringing) men without sin into a Kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.’”<sup>43</sup>

#### *Is The Message Anthropocentric Rather Than God-Focused?*

The sixth potential compromise is when the message becomes anthropocentric rather than God-focused. Some seeker churches fail to offer an authentic Christian message because of their anthropocentric focus. It is possible to so program services and communicate messages that the seeker goes home more impressed with the church, the pastor and the people but less aware of their God; such impact will not change the human heart. Without neglecting to address the felt needs of the seeker, the pastor must not fall into the trap of implying that the answer lies in putting oneself at the center. Larry Crabb says, “Too many people ‘go to church’ as one more effort to find themselves and live more happily. The result is a user-friendly mentality that can obscure the gospel of Christ with a consumerism that encourages us to think of ourselves, not God, as the real point of life.”<sup>44</sup> David Wells calls for a return to theocentric concerns, “The difference is that the biblical authors see everything from a theocentric viewpoint, and secular writers see everything from an anthropocentric viewpoint. . . . The biblical writers compel us to read the world from this perspective, to see it in relation to the moral character of God and the ways in which he has disclosed his saving intentions in human history. Secular writers, by contrast, force us to read the world from within a framework in which God’s moral will and saving intentions, his truth and his Christ, are never the criteria of meaning or importance.”<sup>45</sup> John MacArthur rightly challenges the shallow view of salvation prevalent in some messages:

*The most basic truths of our faith have fallen victim to this self-centered theology. Many modern-day evangelists have reduced the gospel message to little more than a formula by which people can live a happy and more fulfilling life. Sin is now defined by how it affects man, not how it dishonors God. Salvation is often presented as a means of receiving what Christ offers without obeying what He commands. The focus has shifted from God’s glory to man’s benefit. The gospel of persevering faith has given way to a kind of religious hedonism. Jesus, contemporary theology implies, is your ticket to avoiding all of life’s pains and experiencing all of life’s pleasures.*<sup>46</sup>

#### *Is The Message Of The Cross Neglected?*

The seventh potential compromise is when the message of the cross is neglected. Does a seeker-sensitive approach to ministry affect the centrality of the cross? Often the sheer brilliance, creativity or high user-value of the topic in a series or message can result in the most obvious and central message of the Bible being neglected--the message of the cross. John MacArthur observes: “Ministers who take their cues from *USA Today* rather than from God’s Word will quickly discover the message that seemed so relevant last week is now yesterday’s news. Preaching that conceals the unchanging gospel behind the fleeting issues of our time cloaks the very force that makes good preaching truly powerful. After all, it is not our anecdotes, applications, how-tos, jokes, catchy titles, clever outlines, or other contrivances--but the *gospel* that is ‘the power

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<sup>40</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 135-37.

<sup>41</sup> Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 208.

<sup>42</sup> James Davison Hunter, Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 87, quoted in Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, 267.

<sup>43</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 78, quoting H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper Torchback), 191-92.

<sup>44</sup> Larry Crabb, “If I Could Direct the Wind: How would I instruct the Spirit to move in modern culture?” *Mars Hill Review*: Premiere Issue, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 44.

<sup>46</sup> MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 154-155.

of God for salvation' (Rom. 1:16).<sup>47</sup> Because of the importance of this last potential compromise we shall now take it up and ask whether God and Scripture foundational to the evangelistic ministry of seeker churches.

### *Responses To Concerns About 'The Message' Of Seeker Churches?*

Seeker churches need to reexamine the extent to which unnecessary fears of cultural irrelevance diminish their focus on the transcendent and supernatural. Lest they be swept along by the trend in the evangelical church at large and by a false understanding of cultural relevance, seeker church leaders need to ask, "Do seeker services offer encounters with God based on His self-revelation or are they an event that is seriously lacking in the transcendent and supernatural?" Leith Anderson reminds us that God and the Bible are not unexpected at church. He writes, "Churches are people and places where God is expected to be present and his Book is no surprise. The churches of the twenty-first century that flourish among those seeking the supernatural will be the ones that talk about and offer authentic supernatural experiences."<sup>48</sup> Sally Morgenthaler argues convincingly that seekers actually expect more than some seeker churches offer them:

*Most, however, want to do more than just "investigate the claims of Christ"; they want to meet the Christ in us and the Christ in our services. . . . we simply cannot continue to approach our culture as if it were made up of Madelyn Murray O'Hairs.*

*If we hope to have any impact on our culture in this decade, we have to change. Our worship is going to need to feature direct, supernatural interaction with God. This is not only timely. It's thoroughly Biblical. And ironically, it is what the unchurched expect the church to do.<sup>49</sup>*

Many concerned advocates of the seeker church would say that in their quest for relevance some seeker churches are failing to offer the one thing seekers need most--an encounter with God himself. As has been stated already, churches which do not include worship in the seeker service (and see few believers return for the believers service) are missing an opportunity to offer the seeker an experience of the transcendent that no other environment can reproduce. The Apostle Paul tells us that one unique feature of the church is that it is, "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22). This transcendent experience can powerfully affect the seeker as believers gather in expectation of meeting with God himself, as they model authentic worship and a desire to hear from God's Word. Morgenthaler puts the challenge succinctly, "Non-worshippers will never be able to inspire others to worship."<sup>50</sup> Many seeker churches need to rethink whether their focus on relating to the seeker has diminished the very sense of transcendence that comes as the seeker watches them relating to God.

Regarding the role of Biblical preaching and teaching in the ministry of the seeker church, despite the claims of the critics, most seeker church leaders actually affirm it as central. Rick Warren defends it as essential:

*Preaching seems to go in and out of fashion in many denominations. In our high-tech world, it is often criticized as being an outdated and uninteresting mode of communication. I agree that many preaching styles that once worked no longer effectively communicate to unbelievers. In terms of seeing radical life changes in individuals, however, nothing else can take the place of Spirit-anointed preaching. The message is still the most important element of a seeker service. Saddleback's fifteen years of growth in spite of hot gymnasiums, leaky tents, and crowded parking have shown that people will put up with a lot of inconveniences and limitations if the messages are genuinely meeting their needs.<sup>51</sup>*

Willow Creek likewise warns in their values statement Value #1 ("We believe that anointed teaching is the catalyst for transformation in individuals' lives and in the church."):

*According to Acts 2:42, the first believers devoted themselves "to the apostles' teaching." It is clear from all these passages that the Bible has the catalytic power to transform the lives of individual believers, and by extension, to transform the church.*

*When we speak of "anointed" biblical teaching, we refer to teaching that goes beyond information to transformation. It is teaching that is empowered and led by the Holy Spirit from preparation to presentation. It goes beyond simple biblical accuracy to a relevant application of truth--impacting those who listen and respond. . . . To remain solidly biblical, teachers need to teach the whole counsel of God. When trying to reach seekers, the temptation is to create a steady diet of "felt-need" teaching. It might be easier to shy away from those passages that*

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<sup>47</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 121.

<sup>48</sup> Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 22.

<sup>49</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 59, 66.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>51</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 306.

*could possibly offend unbelievers or make them uncomfortable. But true biblical teaching requires teachers to be obedient to the Spirit's leadings and promptings so that they will teach the whole counsel of God. . . .*<sup>52</sup>

Again, the emphasis is on the centrality of the Word of God in Value #3 (“We Believe That the Church Should Be Culturally Relevant While Remaining Doctrinally Pure.”):

*. . . When it comes to communicating the gospel, “remaining doctrinally pure” means that a church does not ignore, massage, manipulate or otherwise distort the fundamental truths revealed in the Bible, but instead displays an unflinching adherence to and unapologetic proclamation of biblical truth. In 2 Timothy 4:2-4, Paul charged Timothy to resolutely preach the Word, because “the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead . . . they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (v.3). Paul knew that the message of the cross would be perceived as foolish or offensive by many, and Jesus made it clear that what He proclaimed would cause division (1 Cor. 1:22-25; Gal. 5:11; Man. 10:34-36). The temptation to coddle a resistant society must be carefully monitored, and those in church leadership must refuse to back away from proclaiming the truth.*<sup>53</sup>

This has particular application to the use of the arts in seeker church ministry; creative communication is “art for the heart’s sake” not “art for art’s sake.” The W.C.A. statement is a healthy reminder: “A teacher should also be alert to the danger of allowing the arts, versus the message, to become the primary focus of a seeker service or a believers’ service. The use of drama, music and other elements must always remain secondary and in a supportive role to the preaching of the Word of God. The arts should serve as guides that prepare the listeners for the message from God. The arts, when effectively integrated into a service and when done in a God-honoring way, will engage the heart, emotions and intellect of the seeker or worshipper.”<sup>54</sup>

Some critics take the view that only verse-by-verse expository preaching is acceptable for any church. Thus the topical series popular at many seeker churches is seen as a compromise of biblical purity. But even Jesus and Paul did not use verse-by-verse exposition of the Old Testament. John Stott argues that expository preaching has less to do with verse-by-verse approach and more to do with teaching in a way that Scripture “speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly.” In his book on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*, he says:

*. . . It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course, if by an “expository” sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, “exposition” has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor pries open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is “imposition,” which is to impose on the text what is not there. But the “text” in question could be a verse, or a sentence, or even a single word. It could equally be a paragraph, or a chapter, or a whole book. The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical. What matters is what we do with it. Whether it is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification.*<sup>55</sup>

Rick Warren also advocates a topical approach (verse-with-verse) when speaking to seekers and expository (verse-by-verse) for a believers service: “I do not believe verse-by-verse teaching through the books of the Bible is the most effective way to evangelize the unchurched. Instead, you must start on common ground, just as Paul did with his pagan audience at the Areopagus in Athens. . . . Both verse-by-verse (book) exposition and verse-with-verse (topical) exposition are necessary in order to grow a healthy church.”<sup>56</sup>

Another complaint—that seeker churches emphasize relevance at the expense of truth—needs careful examination. Clearly there are also challenges that any church—traditional or contemporary—must recognize. Just as MacArthur cites the seeker church for undocctrinal attempts at relevance the traditional church could be cited for irrelevant presentations of doctrine; the staff candidate, applying for a position at our church, who spent ten minutes in a thirty minute message developing the identity of the money changers who were turned out the temple by Jesus would do well to ask the ever-present question of the seeker church pastor—“So what?” The real complaint of seeker churches is with those who make theology seem irrelevant by their passionless and disinterested presentations. Additionally, traditional churches must resist the temptation to equate anointed teaching with “politically correct doctrine.” “To be fair, one must hasten to add that the necessity of spiritual anointing challenges all preaching, including theologically earnest preaching. Quoting John Calvin

<sup>52</sup> Olsson, “Defining a Movement,” 1-2. See Appendix D for the full statement of this value.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>54</sup> Olsson, “Defining A Movement,” 2.

<sup>55</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1982), 125-126.

<sup>56</sup> Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 296. See also Rick Warren’s comments on the Biblical basis for starting with felt-needs in preaching to seekers in Chapter 5 of this thesis, “Do Seeker Churches Overuse Marketing Tools?”

does not empower preaching any more than quoting *Time* magazine. Calvin has far more to say to us than *Time* magazine does; but he is not the Holy Spirit, and quoting him or John Owen or Jonathan Edwards or any other mere human being does not empower our preaching. Our ministerial idolatries come in all shapes and sizes.<sup>57</sup>

Anyone, whether in the seeker church or traditional church, knows the tension of standing “between two worlds,” as John Stott described preaching in the title of his book.<sup>58</sup> This tension is the tension between revelation and relevance; the wisdom of relating to one’s hearers balanced by the necessity of sharing truth from God; the tension between a desire for the atmosphere of the transcendent and a relevance to the immediate. This is what often leads seeker churches to recognize the limited but significant role of small groups in teaching God’s Word; to offer good teaching in meaningful, interactive, relational, and caring small group environments is a culturally relevant way to present God’s Word without compromising Biblical purity. David Wells sums up his concerns and offers a word of hope to any seeker church willing to live in the tension between two worlds:

*Unless the evangelical Church can recover the knowledge of what it means to live before a holy God unless in its worship it can relearn humility, wonder, love, and praise, unless it can find again a moral purpose in the world that resonates with the holiness of God and that is accordingly deep and unyielding--unless the evangelical Church can do all of these things theology will have no place in its life. But the reverse is also true. If the Church can begin to find a place for theology by refocusing itself on the centrality of God, if it can rest upon his sufficiency, if it can recover its moral fiber, then it will have some thing to say to a world now drowning in modernity. And there lies a great irony. Those who are most relevant to the modern world are those most irrelevant to the moral purpose of God, but those who are irrelevant in the world by virtue of their relevance to God actually have the most to say to the world. They are, in fact, the only ones who having anything to say to it. That is what Jesus declared, what the Church in its best moments has known, and what we, by the grace of God, can yet again discover.<sup>59</sup>*

### **Are God And Scripture Foundational To The Evangelism Of Seeker Churches?**

Frequently, seeker churches are charged with preaching a watered down gospel. This is a serious matter as the Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8-9)

#### ***Do Seeker Churches Have Confidence That The Gospel Is The Power Of God?***

The seeker church must be careful that the message of the church for twenty centuries--the gospel, the power of God--is not “selectively transmitted.” That is, in an attempt to be relevant to this generation we lose features of the gospel and eventually the gospel itself for future generations.

John Armstrong reminds us of the Reformation principle of Sola Fide and expresses concern for much of the preaching in seeker churches, “This means that preaching on marriage, family, or finance without the word of the Cross at the center is a new form of legalism. It is a modern moralism without Christ and the Cross. It is not, fundamentally, evangelical.”<sup>60</sup> Ray Ortlund Jr. reminds us that relevance goes in two directions:

*... “Jesus Christ and him crucified” was, for Paul, the ultimate criterion for what we today call “relevance.” And with his typically refreshing outlook, the apostle defined relevance not as we tend to do. For him, relevance had to be defined not in terms of meeting audience expectations but in relation to the centrality of the Cross. His preaching agenda was set by that theological center, not by his audience. He determined not to be “practical,” if that meant limiting his message to subjects like time-management, self-esteem, stress-reduction, and so on. “Do such things flow from the Cross?” Paul would insist upon asking. If a certain subject had no meaningful, unstrained relation to the Cross, for all that that means, then Paul determined to ignore it, no matter how magnetic it might be for getting people through the doors. One is reminded that the adjective “relevant” is to be construed with the word “to.” One thing is always relevant to another. Paul’s primary concern was that his preaching would be relevant to the absolute, unmoving, non-negotiable center of his whole world view, viz., the Cross. That was his given, around which everything else revolved. We tend to use the word “relevant” (or “relevance”) without the “to \_.” We take it for granted that “relevance” stands in relation to popular culture, so that “a relevant ministry” tells us only that it is contemporary in style. We have, perhaps without even thinking, bent the direction of “relevance” back down toward culture rather than up to the Cross.<sup>61</sup>*

<sup>57</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., “The Power of the Gospel in the Church Today,” *Trinity Journal* 18 NS, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 12.

<sup>58</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>59</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 301.

<sup>60</sup> Armstrong, *Evangelical Crisis*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Ortlund, “The Power of the Gospel,” 3-13.

Additionally, the stepping stones to the cross are a sense of sin, righteousness and judgement; but if these are minimized how can the cross be magnified? Robert Wenz observes:

*The foundational problem of our present age is that our theology will fail to generate true worship of God if there is no understanding of who God is and who we are in relationship to his holiness. Without an understanding of holiness of the God who is a “consuming fire” there is no proper understanding of human sin. Without an understanding of sin there is no understanding of the totality of our consequential alienation from God. Without an understanding of the consequences of sin there is no understanding of grace. Without an understanding of grace, there is no proper motivation for worship—and nothing to celebrate. Without a proper motivation for worship we are left with either dead legalism and ritual or a human-centered substitute for true worship that never takes our focus off of ourselves and elevates it to God.<sup>62</sup>*

John MacArthur reminds us:

*The gospel is to be preached persuasively, earnestly and clearly. There certainly is a crucial need for preachers and witnesses for Christ with unique intellectual and creative gifts to apply their communication skills to the creative presentation of the gospel. It is by no means wrong to want to be fresh, resourceful, persuasive, and interesting. Any preacher who is truly excited about and committed to the gospel will naturally display those attributes. But keep the focus on the message, not the style. We must make the gospel our one message to the world. After all, it is the gospel—not human inventiveness, not “user-friendliness,” not clever techniques or modern methodology that is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.<sup>63</sup>*

### ***Do Seeker Churches Have An Adequate Biblical Understanding Of The ‘Seeker’?***

Many seeker churches give little practical consideration to the Biblical understanding of the seeker.<sup>64</sup> They are encouraged by the flagship churches and the church growth books to think of their “target audience” in marketing terms. Rick Warren describes Saddleback Sam; Willow Creek describes Unchurched Harry and Mary. Many churches adapt these profiles and develop their own as they then develop a seeker service targeting Sam, Harry, or Mary’s felt needs. Their intentions—to know their seeking friends better and adapt their outreach to them—are not necessarily wrong. The problem lies in what has been neglected. They have developed marketing, sociological, and experiential profiles of their target audience but have not developed a spiritual profile of the seeker based on Biblical truth. Willow Creek barely mentions the spiritual profile of a seeker in their conferences but make much of the other profiles. Most, if not all authors who are proponents of seeker church ministry do the same and do not develop a Biblical understanding of the seeker.<sup>65</sup> Lee Strobel’s observations of the seeker are very helpful in his book but again he does not develop a spiritual profile.<sup>66</sup> Marketing, sociologically and experientially driven profiles are useful tools and a helpful corrective to irrelevance but are dangerous if they replace Biblical truth and categories of thinking about the seeker. If too much confidence is put in a sociological and experiential understanding of the seeker and mistaken assumptions about the seeker are accepted, several things may result: 1) We may be tempted to alter radically the style of the service thinking that will bring spiritual interest. 2) We then run the risk of placing our confidence in the power of a well-programmed seeker service to cause spiritual change. 3) We may be tempted to change not only the style of the service but the message itself since we will lack of confidence in the power of the gospel to penetrate spiritual defenses. 4) The radically altered seeker service may lead to a misunderstood version of Christianity by the seeker and 5) We may get an influx of converts, not to the gospel, but of devotees to our new “cool” religion. A corrective to all of these errors is found in a Biblical understanding of the seeker. What does the Bible teach about seekers and the seeking process?

*God Is The Seeker, He Is Seeking Worshipers, And He Reveals Himself To Those He Chooses<sup>67</sup>*

The words of Jesus remind us that his mission was to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus also told the stories of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son, each story emphasizing the search for the lost (Matthew 18:12; Luke 15). Jesus also

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<sup>62</sup> Wenz, *Room for God?* 90.

<sup>63</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 135-36.

<sup>64</sup> See also Chapter 5 of this thesis, “*A Simplistic A View Of Marketing And People?*” under the heading “Concerns About Marketing Tools.”

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Walt Kallestad’s *Entertainment Evangelism*, Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Church*, Ed Dobson’s *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service*, or George G. Hunter’s *How to reach Secular People*. Some of these authors develop a more Biblical rationale than others but none of them puts as much emphasis on the Biblical truth about the seeker as they do on the sociological and experiential observations about the seeker. For example, Hunter lists what ‘what effective apostolic congregations do’ and includes as the first two steps, “1) They research the community and the unchurched population. 2) They ‘profile’ their target population.” None of the other eight steps says anything about a Biblical profile of the seeker (pp. 144-170).

<sup>66</sup> Lee Strobel, *Inside The Mind of Unchurched Harry & Mary*, 45-79. See Chapter 2 of this thesis for a list of these observations.

<sup>67</sup> For the full text of the Scriptures listed in this section see Appendix I.

taught that God is seeking worshippers to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). As A. W. Tozer said “Why did Christ come? Why was he so concerned? . . . In order that he might make worshippers out of rebels . . .” Jesus also made it clear that he chose his disciples not the other way round (John 6:70; 15:16). In fact, Jesus teaches that no one can come to him unless the Father draws and enables them (John 6:44,65) and all who are thus enabled come to Christ (John 6:37-40; 44-45).

*No One Truly Seeks God And People Seek God For The Wrong Reasons . . .*

Scriptures such as Romans 3:10-11 seem to teach the total inability of the unbeliever to “seek” let alone trust Christ.<sup>68</sup> Yet, we seem to observe people seeking God. What is the solution to this anomaly? R. C. Sproul helps address the tension by observing that, “Aquinas said that we confuse two similar yet different human actions. We see people searching desperately for peace of mind, relief from guilt, meaning and purpose to their lives, and loving acceptance. We know that ultimately these things can only be found in God. Therefore, we conclude that since people are seeking these things they must be seeking after God. People do not seek God. They seek after the benefits that only God can give them. The sin of fallen man is this: Man seeks the benefits of God while at the same time fleeing from God himself. We are, by nature, fugitives.”<sup>69</sup>

Often the Bible portrays those coming to Christ as seeking material or other benefits and not spiritual truth life (John 6:26-29). The Cambridge Declaration is right when it reminds us: “God’s grace in Christ is not merely necessary but is the sole efficient cause of salvation. We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace. Thesis Three: Sola Gratia: We reaffirm that in salvation we are rescued from God’s wrath by his grace alone. It is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ by releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from spiritual death to spiritual life. We deny that salvation is in any sense a human work. Human methods, techniques or strategies by themselves cannot accomplish this transformation. Faith is not produced by our unregenerated human nature.”<sup>70</sup> In response to the complaint that, “The theology of seeker churches overestimates what humans can do, including seeking God” Willow Creek says,

*. . . in our own power and volition, no one seeks after God. Romans 3:11 removes any ambiguity about this. Anyone who is really seeking God is doing so because the Holy Spirit is already working in his or her life. All genuine seeking is a response to God’s activity. And when a person finally does come to the point of trusting Christ, that is not a religious work, and they don’t have anything to brag about ( Eph. 2:8-9); they’ve simply yielded to His Spirit and received His free gift of salvation. . . We think the key issue is that we all need to do our part in making the message clear and accessible to everyone we possibly can, trusting God to do His part in drawing people and changing hearts. Whenever that happens, the Calvinist and the Arminian can sit at the table together and have a friendly chat about their theories while they join in joyful celebration, along with the angels in heaven (Lk. 15:10), over this new brother or sister in Christ!<sup>71</sup>*

*. . . Yet God Designed, Honors And Encourages The Seeking Process*

It is also clear that God encourages the seeking process and says that it will culminate in meeting him. Indeed, God invites us to seek him while he may be found and he tells us if we do we will find him (Isaiah 55:6-7; Jeremiah 29:11-14a). Paul makes it abundantly clear in his encounter with the men of Athens at the Areopagus that God has designed the seeking process, “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup>God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-28). Yet Paul also quotes Isaiah as a reminder that God allows himself to be found by those who did not seek him (Romans 10:20). All who engage in this process and are appointed to eternal life will come to believe (Acts 13:48).<sup>72</sup>

*Some But Not All Unbelievers Are Seekers . . .*

Sometimes the mistake is made of assuming all unbelievers are seekers. While all lost people matter to God, not all lost people are seekers; the Bible says there are different categories of unbeliever. There is the fool who says there is no God,

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<sup>68</sup> Romans 3:10-11 “As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.’”

<sup>69</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God*.

<sup>70</sup> “The Cambridge Declaration,” 7.

<sup>71</sup> “Myths About a Movement,” 5.

<sup>72</sup> See also: Deut. 4:29; Psalm 9:10; Psalm 14:2; Acts 2:21; Acts 15:16-18; Acts 17:26-28; Matthew 6:33; Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 12:31; Romans 2:5-11; Romans 10:13; Hebrews 11:6; James 4:8; Rev. 3:20; Rev. 21:6; Rev. 22:17.

the hard-hearted who run from God and the wicked who are far from God (Psalm 53:1-3; Psalm 78:32-33; Psalm 119:55). It is worth noting that Jesus did not view all unbelievers as seekers. For example, Jesus never answered Herod's questions, "When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because he had heard about the things that he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer." (Luke 23:8-9) The same happened to Pilate in John 18-19. Thus we can surmise from Scripture that while all seekers are unbelievers not all unbelievers are seekers (see Figure 3).

This has great relevance to seeker church ministry. One seeker church leader was lamenting that he didn't feel safe bringing his seeker friend to seeker services and was asked why. He responded that his friend was unlikely to listen to anything from probably only come to something with minimal spiritual content. My response was this, "He may not be a seeker. He may just be a hard-neck. The seeker over for him at m and love content in a this stage. But you him." Tragically, seeker service

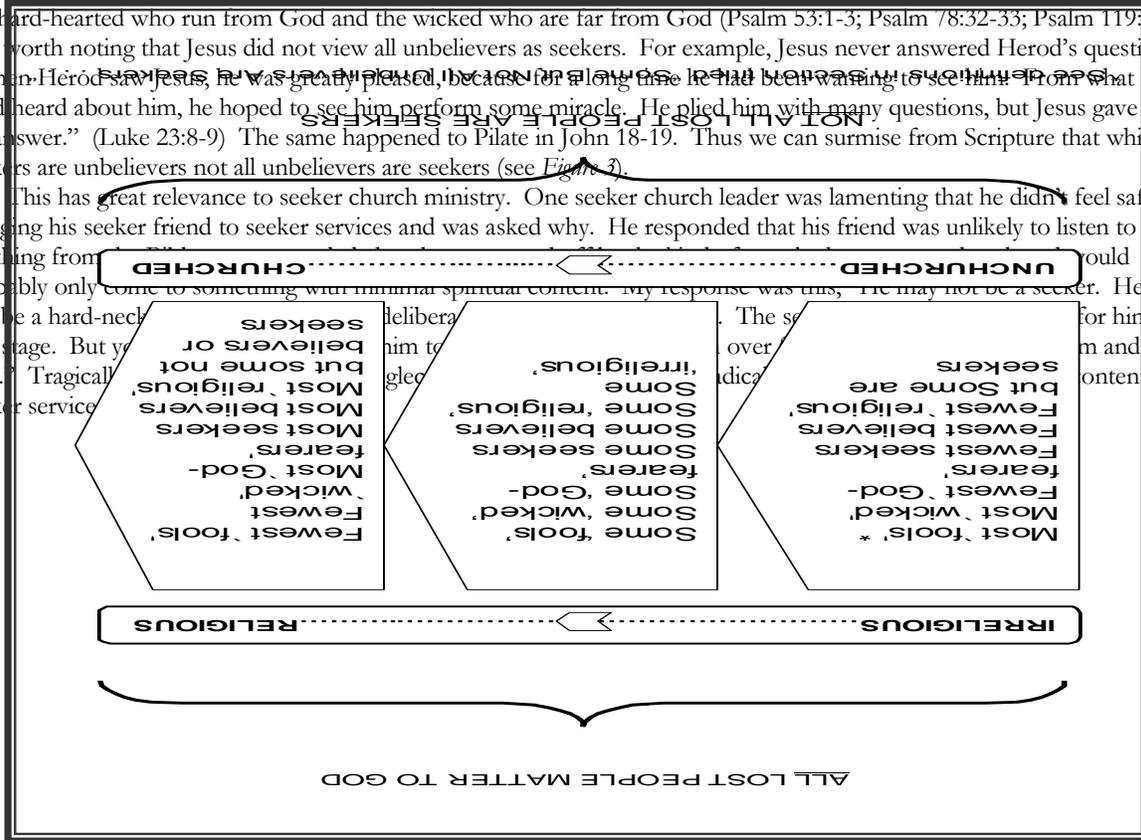


Figure 3. *Who Matters To God?*

A further mistake is often made in assuming that all seekers are “hard-core”—cynical, skeptical atheists. Some seeker churches then transform the Sunday morning service into a seeker-targeted event and pour all their efforts into reaching this extreme caricature of their own imagination. This view often emanates from people who are drawn to the thrill of targeting hard-to-reach types; they let this thrill and the pride of seeing a small measure of success override their better judgement in reaching a broader spectrum of seeker or building up the whole church. In the process they undermine the edification of believers and may put off many more genuine seekers around them. While the seeker church slogan is “Lost people matter to God” the undiscerning seeker church leader often translates this into “God doesn’t matter to lost people.” This is close enough to the truth to be a dangerous assumption as the foundation for all seeker church ministry. In the book of Acts Paul often targeted his message toward and was heard gladly by “God-fearers”—those who had already made a partial response toward God and were more ready to hear the gospel (Acts 2:5; Acts 10:22; Acts 13:26; Acts 13:50; Acts 17:4; Acts 17:17).

This misunderstanding that all secular people are skeptics goes hand-in-hand with the idea that they have no meaningful religious background. In fact, their religious background may be significant and will vary depending on the State, region, country, and a host of other factors. Connecting with a previous meaningful religious experience can be as important a part of ministry to seekers as assuming they all come with hostility and cynicism. Sally Morgenthaler points out that “We are ultimately shooting ourselves in the foot if we bypass the religious experiences secular people do have—that is, those they carry around with them in their memory banks. Eighty-three percent of the adults in the United States were churchgoers at sometime in their lives, including a walloping 95 percent of boomers who received a religious upbringing. (Richard Ostling, “The Church Search,” *Time*, 5 Apr 1993, 45) What that means is that most people in this country born before 1963 have had some experience with traditional forms of worship. . . .”<sup>73</sup> Os Guinness also challenges conventional wisdom on the numbers of unchurched being reached, “. . .most of the ‘unchurched’ reached would be better described as ‘semi-churched.’ Studies show that nearly half of America’s ‘unchurched’ think about going to church at least once a week—which greatly increases the chance of having people accept an invitation to church. (See Context, 1 December 1991, p 5) . . . In other words, most of the newly reached ‘unchurched’ are really spiritual refugees from the collapse of three groups—legalistic fundamentalism, watered-down liberalism, and overritualistic traditionalism.”<sup>74</sup>

We see Paul in the book of Acts being very effective in reaching this kind of “religious seeker.” Some of those God-fearers were already engaged in religious activities before hearing the gospel—activities such as prayer, worship, generous charitable giving, etc. (Acts 8:27; Acts 10:2; Acts 13:16; Acts 16:13-14; Acts 17:23; Acts 18:7). On hearing the gospel they responded gladly and trusted Christ.

... *But All Seekers Are Unbelievers*

Some imagine that if we can just get clever enough in the way we program or communicate in a seeker service we can make the difference in a seeker’s response. The antidote to such naivete is to study what the Bible says about the seeker. We can get an insight into this by examining what the Bible says about our natural state before salvation from which we learn the following truths about unbelievers and seekers:<sup>75</sup>

*They are like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36).*

*They cannot see or accept the Holy Spirit and his testimony to Jesus (John 14:17).*

*The world hates Christ and the believer but is affirmed by unbelievers (John 15:18).*

*They experience guilt in regard to sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16:8).*

*They do not know the Father (John 17:25).*

*They are spiritually blind, living in darkness and under the power of Satan, without forgiveness (Acts 26:17-18).*

<sup>73</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 128

<sup>74</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 82.

<sup>75</sup> See also: Psalm 78:32-33; Matthew 9:36; Matthew 25:31-34; Mark 16:16; Luke 8:12; Luke 12:46; John 3:18; John 4:48; John 5:37-40; John 6:30; John 6:64; John 8:24; John 8:44-45; John 10:25-28; John 12:47-50; Acts 13:48; Romans 5:6, 8; Romans 6:17, 19-20; 1 Cor. 1:26-31; 1 Cor. 6:9-11, 20; 1 Cor. 7:23; 1 Cor. 12:2; 2 Cor. 4:3; Galatians 4:8; Ephes. 2:13, 11-12; Ephes. 4:22; Ephes. 5:6, 8; Col. 1:21 Col. 2:13 Col. 3:5-8; 1 Tim. 5:8; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Titus 1:15; Titus 3:3; 1 Peter 1:18; 1 Peter 2:10; 1 Peter 2:25; 2 Peter 3:3-7; 1 John 4:5; Rev. 21:8

*They are under God's wrath, suppress the truth, are without excuse, and ignore God (Romans 1:18-20).*

*They are "powerless" and "ungodly" (Romans 5:6).*

*They are slaves to sin (Romans 6:17, 20).*

*They "offer the parts of (their) bodies in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness" and are "free from the control of righteousness" (Romans 6:19-20).*

*The gospel is foolishness and a stumbling block to them (1 Cor. 1:18, 23).*

*The unbeliever is described as being "without the Spirit" and does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God; such things are "foolishness" to him, and he cannot understand them (1 Cor. 2:14).*

*The Corinthians, for example, were not influential, of noble birth; they were foolish, weak, and lowly. They were wicked, sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers and they could not inherit the kingdom of God. They were "pagans," who were "influenced and led astray to mute idols" (1 Cor. 1:26-31; 6:9-11; 12:2).*

*The gospel is veiled to them; their minds have been blinded by "the god of this age"; the result is that "they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:3-4).*

*Their lives are characterized by "wickedness" and "darkness" (2 Cor. 6:14-15).*

*They need to be "rescued from the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4).*

*They do not know God and are slaves to those who by nature are not Gods (Galatians 4:8).*

*They are dead in their transgressions and sins; they follow "the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air"; they are disobedient; they live "gratifying the cravings of (their) sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. . . ."; they are "by nature objects of wrath" (Ephes. 2:1-3).*

*They are "separate from Christ" and "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Ephes. 2:11-12).*

*They are being corrupted by the deceitful desires of the old self (Ephes. 4:22).*

*They live in "darkness" (Ephes. 5:8).*

*They are "alienated from God" and "enemies in (their) minds because of (their) evil behavior" (Col. 1:21).*

*They are "dead in (their) sins and in the uncircumcision of (their) sinful nature"; they are unforgiven and still in their sins (Col. 2:13).*

*They walk in "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry; anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language" (Col. 3:5-8).*

*They are "foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures" living in "malice and envy, being hated and hating one another" (Titus 3:3).*

*They live an "empty way of life handed down to (them) from (their) forefathers" (1 Peter 1:18).*

*They are not the people of God and have not received mercy (1 Peter 2:10).*

*They are "like sheep going astray" (1 Peter 2:25).*

David Wells reminds us that decisions without sufficient awareness of ourselves as sinners before God will be inadequate. Decisions made in the absence of an adequate knowledge of God, his Word, sin and Christ will likely be malformed and therefore lacking in direction and staying power.<sup>76</sup> It is all too easy to be seeker-sensitive without addressing the major issue of sin in the seeker's life--seeker-sensitive but sinner-insensitive, even Savior insensitive.

*God Uses The Gospel To Bring Seekers To Salvation . . .*

It is worthwhile to remember that God uses the preaching of the gospel as the power to bring men and women to himself. Even the cross, though, can be emptied of its power if we seek to enhance it with words of human wisdom (Romans 1:16-17; 1 Cor. 1:17-25; 1 Cor 2:1-5), or seek to make a good impression outwardly, because we are afraid of being persecuted (Gal. 6:12). All that is essential to man's salvation is a gift from God (Acts 11:18; 13:48; Ephesians 2:8-9).

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<sup>76</sup> David F. Wells, "Conversion: How and Why We Turn to God." *Christianity Today*, 1991, 35(1): 28-31.

... *And God Uses Believers To Bring The Gospel To Seekers*

God uses believers to bring the gospel to seekers. We do this as we let them see the effects of the gospel and of God's wisdom in our lives. We do this by building bridges of friendship and letting them see the source of our strength--God and his Word. The Bible tells us believers spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ to seekers and to unbelievers (2 Cor. 2:15). This cannot be overestimated--it is what Joseph Aldrich refers to as "the music of the gospel" and what Jim Peterson refers to as "the affirmation of the gospel: a process of modeling and explaining the Christian message."<sup>77</sup> Biblical examples abound--the Queen of Sheba was a seeker who was drawn to God through the excellence and relevant application of Solomon's wisdom:

*2 Chron. 9:1-10 When the queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, she came to Jerusalem to test him with hard questions. Arriving with a very great caravan--with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones--she came to Solomon and talked with him about all she had on her mind. (2) Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for him to explain to her. (3) When the queen of Sheba saw the wisdom of Solomon, as well as the palace he had built, (4) the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, the cupbearers in their robes and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed. (5) She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. (6) But I did not believe what they said until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half the greatness of your wisdom was told me; you have far exceeded the report I heard. (7) How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! (8) Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule for the Lord your God. Because of the love of your God for Israel and his desire to uphold them forever, he has made you king over them, to maintain justice and righteousness." (9) Then she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. There had never been such spices as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.*

When seekers are moving toward God they will seek out our help for their life's dilemmas (9:1-2); they will be inspired by our commitment to excellence (9:3); they will often be overwhelmed by the way God has blessed us, spiritually and materially (9:4); they will envy the blessings of God in our lives (9:7); and they will often begin to praise God along with us (9:8); sometimes they will want to contribute to God's work before they are saved (9:9). When we walk with God in wisdom seekers will find their way to hear the wisdom of God (9:23).

We can also care for them and help them with their needs. Jesus strategy with seekers was often to simply ask a question; "What do you want me to do for you?" (See Matthew 20:21; Matthew 20:32; Mark 10:36; Mark 10:51; Luke 18:41; John 1:38). Sometimes we underestimate the power of genuine caring. Jim Peterson argues evangelism is a combination of words and deeds--proclamation and affirmation.<sup>78</sup>

Most importantly we can share the gospel. Seeker churches go to great lengths to make it clear to believers that the seeker service is only a supplement to the personal evangelism of the believer. The believer can help his seeking friend by answering questions and being prepared to lead him to Christ. At some point, as we share our lives and message with seekers they will ask, what must we do? (Acts 2:37-39 Acts 16:29-32). At that point we must share the gospel. Seeker churches also do this most effectively in the seeker service. The seeker church can be prepared by giving opportunities to express interest and be followed up at every service and opportunities to trust Christ at some services. Seeker churches have a much healthier view of conversion (as both a process and an event) than many traditional churches. Some criticize Willow Creek and seeker churches for not "drawing the net" at every seeker service. The concern is that a seeker may only come to one service and an opportunity is missed to lead people to Christ if an invitation is not given. In response, Willow Creek argues effectively:

*We respect this concern and wrestle with trying to understand God's Word and wisdom on this. We want to help as many people as possible come to Christ as soon as possible. And if we were convinced that a gospel presentation and invitation every week was the most effective approach for the kinds of people we're trying to reach, we'd be doing it. For that matter, we'd do it three times a service if that was the way God seemed to be leading!*

*But that is not the case. We feel there's danger in the "more is always better" philosophy. Both on a personal and a church-wide level, we fear that, for secular people, hitting them with the message and a strong call to commitment too often will be one of the quickest ways of losing our chance to influence them for Christ. In other words, the fear that "you might only get one chance" can become self-fulfilling prophecy if it leads you to push people too hard. . . .*

*. . . The gospel is woven in and through every aspect of ministry at Willow Creek. Perfectly? Of course not. Biblically and effectively? As*

<sup>77</sup> See Joseph Aldrich, *Lifestyle Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries To Reach The Unbelieving World* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1981) and Jim Peterson, *Living Proof: Sharing the Gospel Naturally* (Navpress: Colorado Springs, 1989), for two outstanding books on personal evangelism that emphasize what we can do for seekers.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Philip. 1:27; Philip. 2:14-15; Col. 4:5-6; 1 Thes. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:1,7; 1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:1-5; Philemon 1:6; 1 Peter 2:12,15,17; 1 Peter 3:1; 1 Peter 3:15-16; Jude 1:22

*Jesus said, judge by the fruit that's being borne: thousands of once-irreligious people are becoming increasingly devoted followers of Christ. And, by God's grace, in the last six months, another 636 new believers were baptized.<sup>79</sup>*

### **Responses To Concerns About The Evangelistic Ministry Of Seeker Churches**

To the extent that any seeker church is enamored with methods, strategies, and the persuasive power of a program, it has lost its trust in the sufficient power of the gospel. It may be acceptable to remove the cross from the sanctuary as a means of providing a safer environment for seekers but if it is replaced with a false sense of confidence in our own ability to be culturally relevant we will fail. The Apostle Paul reminds us if there were something he could be known for, that would separate him, that would be his niche--he says let it be the cross—"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). What makes seeker churches different if anything is not cute attempts at making the church or the message culturally relevant but that they so believe in the power of the cross that they are willing to use any creative medium to communicate its message in a culturally relevant way.

On the issue of the centrality of the gospel, Willow Creek jumps quickly to the defense of the members of its association in the association newsletter. Dealing with the "myth" that "Seeker churches preach a watered-down gospel." the writer acknowledges the seriousness of the charge but responds, ". . . when we scan the landscape of what is happening in the core of Willow Creek Association churches all over the world, here's the pattern we see: a bold proclamation of the gospel, clear biblical teaching, and the fruit of transformed lives and families. We celebrate as we hear story after story of people trusting in Christ, being baptized, taking steps to grow as His disciples and, as a result, churches increasing in size and strength."<sup>80</sup>

However, I have sat through too many seeker services and heard of others in churches inspired by Willow Creek on both sides of the Atlantic and cannot agree with this sweeping approval. Some seeker churches have assumed that to do good seeker ministry means to minimize Biblical content and the gospel in favor of events programmed as a sort of pre-evangelism. Some talks given at seeker services give the impression the speaker is unconvinced that the gospel is the power of God. Some services are so packed full with creative drama, clever clips from movies, secular songs, and a humorous talk that there is little room for the power of the gospel. Too much dependence on a culturally relevant style of communication throughout the service and in preaching can become a false dependency and can adversely affect the gospel.

Despite the fact that this is what some seeker churches are doing, this is clearly not what Willow Creek communicates or intends as it inspires so many to reach out with the gospel. In almost every Church Leadership Conference put on by Willow Creek, Bill Hybels refers to a turning point early in his own ministry. It was when he was impressed to go all out in encouraging the high school students of his youth group to bring their friends to an outreach night where he would give the clearest gospel presentation he could. His wife, Lynn, quotes him as saying, "Let's make a pact . . . to fast and pray and bang on the doors of heaven. Let's ask God to be merciful and to take the blinders off the eyes of our unsaved friends. Let's trust in the power of the Gospel to lead people unto salvation." Hybels says honestly he wanted the teens and their friends to like him and Jesus so he dug up his best illustrations and put together his best talk. But the Holy Spirit gave him a "leading." *Read the story of the crucifixion of Christ and tell the kids why Jesus died.* With fear and trembling he did just that. Out of six hundred kids present over three hundred responded by standing to their feet at the invitation to trust Christ--so many in fact that Hybels thought they had misunderstood. After counseling for many hours he tells how he went outside sat down and wept and asked God to use him to share this gospel for the rest of his life; *God, with your strength and for as long as I am in ministry, I will always make sure that our strategy includes a regularly scheduled, high-quality, Spirit-empowered outreach service where irreligious people can come and discover that they matter to You and that Christ died for them.* I believe he is being true to that calling.<sup>81</sup>

Many church leaders in the leadership conferences find the recounting of that incident a Spirit anointed reminder that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed the power of God. It is absolutely vital that every leader who is going to attempt seeker church ministry must have a deep and growing conviction that the gospel must be the central and unchanging feature of all seeker ministry. The temptation (and pressure from some well-meaning attenders, members, drama directors, musicians, artists, and other leaders) to let something else be the focus, to soften the hard edges of the gospel, to be seeker-sensitive but gospel-insensitive is so subtle and yet so powerful that it will be the undoing of many a pastor. The gospel alone is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16) and, as Paul said, the message of God's grace is worth expending our lives to make clear to a lost and dying world (Acts 20:24). The question needs to be asked are we relevant to the world and to the Cross. The W.C.A. newsletter rightly challenges all churches:

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<sup>79</sup> "Myths About a Movement," 5-6. Myth 9 "Seeker churches practice defective evangelism because they don't 'draw the net' at every seeker service."

<sup>80</sup> "Myths About a Movement," 2.

<sup>81</sup> Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*, 39-40. This incident makes a great book worth re-reading and gives an understanding of the origins of Willow Creek's seeker service.

*For any church anywhere that has started giving in to the temptation to soften its message—even a little—in the hope of gaining acceptance and admiration from an irreligious audience, we urge you to stop immediately. To continue would be to compromise with the culture and forget the mission that Jesus gave us.*

*After Paul gave his warning in Gal. 1:8-9, he concluded in verse 10 with these words: “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”*

*We have a mandate to preach the unadulterated message of the shed blood of Christ—whether people like it or not. And here’s the ironic thing: true seekers are looking for a leader who has the guts to look them in the eye and tell them the truth about their spiritual predicament and then point them toward the only One who can help.<sup>82</sup>*

In J. I. Packer’s book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, he raises some excellent issues which are quoted at length here because of their timeless nature and direct relevance to the seeker church issue:

*... there is only one method of evangelism: namely, the faithful explanation and application of the gospel message. From which it follows—and this is the key principle which we are seeking—that the test for any proposed strategy, or technique, or style, of evangelistic action must be this: will it in fact serve the word? Is it calculated to be a means of explaining the gospel truly and fully and applying it deeply and exactly? To the extent to which it is so calculated, it is lawful and right; to the extent to which it tends to overlay and obscure the realities of the message, and to blunt the edge of their application, it is ungodly and wrong.<sup>83</sup>*

In an excellent series of questions that ought to be asked about every new form of ministry under the heading “By What Means and Methods Should Evangelism Be Practised?” Packer suggests a number of questions we should ask about every new form of evangelistic ministry:

*Is this way of presenting Christ calculated to impress on people that the gospel is a word from God? Is it calculated to divert their attention from man and all things merely human to God and His truth? Or is its tendency rather to distract attention from the Author and authority of the message to the person and performance of the messenger? Does it make the gospel sound like a human idea, a preacher’s plaything, or like a divine revelation, before which the human messenger himself stands in awe? Does this way of presenting Christ savour of human cleverness and showmanship? Does it tend thereby to exalt man? . . .*

*. . . is this way of presenting Christ calculated to promote, or impede, the work of the word in men’s minds? Is it going to clarify the meaning of the message, or to leave it enigmatic and obscure, locked up in pious jargon and oracular formulae? . . . Is this way of presenting Christ an attempt to move men by the force of feeling or of truth?*

*. . . is this way of presenting Christ calculated to convey to people the doctrine of the gospel, and not just part of it, but the whole of it?*

*. . . is this way of presenting Christ calculated to convey to people the application of the gospel . . . the summons to see and know oneself as God sees and knows one? . . . Will it, for instance, leave people unaware that they have any immediate obligation to respond to Christ at all?*

*. . . is this way of presenting Christ calculated to convey gospel truth in a manner that is appropriately serious? Is it calculated to make people feel that they are indeed facing a matter of life and death? . . . Will it help them to realize that it is a fearful thing to fall into His hands? Or is this way of presenting Christ so tight and casual and cosy and jolly as to make it hard for the hearers to feel that the gospel is a matter of any consequence . . . ?<sup>84</sup>*

## **The Connection Between Revelation, Reverence, Reality, Redemption, And Relevance**

The greatest danger for those who build on the foundation of cultural relevance is that they forget the source of their message. The source of all we share as believers is God—his revelation to us of himself, uniquely in his Son Jesus Christ. If our goal is to share faithfully his message, we will be guaranteed its relevance. However, if, in a false attempt to make his message more appealing, we feel the need to tamper with it then we can do damage to its relevance. In fact, the proper order of things is revelation, reverence, redemption, reality, and relevance. That is, only as we continually seek God’s message for the church and the world, and only as we reverence it (treat it with the respect and awe as coming from another world), then only as it has made real impact in our own lives will we be speaking with relevance to today’s world.

*Revelation:* Anyone involved in a seeker church needs to be utterly convinced that God’s Word is all it claims to be—the revelation of God himself. Not only does his Word reveal what we need to know for salvation but the greatest revelation takes place in Jesus Christ. (2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12; Hebrews 1:1-2). As Stott says, “Just as human beings disclose their character in their actions, so God has showed himself to us in the death of his Son.”<sup>85</sup> It must always be remembered

<sup>82</sup> “Myths About a Movement,” 2.

<sup>83</sup> Packer, *Evangelism and Sovereignty*, 86.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-90.

<sup>85</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 204.

that the starting place for the message of the gospel is “What does the Bible mean?” (revelation) before I can answer “What does the Bible mean to me or others?” (relevance). Calvin Miller observed, “If we are talking about relevance then we need to talk about truth. Truth is relevant. It speaks beyond felt needs to real needs.”<sup>86</sup> Some in the seeker church movement want to increase the relevant application of the Bible but spend little time answering the first question. It must be asked often, “Is the desire to communicate truth the driving force for relevance or the desire for relevance the opportunity to use the truth?”

*Reverence:* We need to reverence the person and work of Christ (John 1:1-5; Hebrews 1:3). Very often if our focus is on relevance, we begin to fall into subtle pride about the kind of people we think we are; instead of being in awe of Christ and his love and grace we are in awe of ourselves and how good it feels to be on the cutting edge. Henri Nouwen wrote a book that deals almost entirely with the dark side of the temptation to relevance in ministry. In it he says: “My movement from Harvard to L’Arche made me aware in a new way how much my own thinking about Christian leadership had been affected by the desire to be relevant, the desire for popularity, and the desire for power. Too often I looked at being relevant, popular, and powerful as ingredients of an effective ministry.”<sup>87</sup> He suggests the first step to overcoming the thirst for relevance is to recognize it as a temptation and to practice contemplative prayer:

*To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God’s first love, we have to be mystics. A mystic is a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God’s first love. . . .*

*It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness? . . .*

*. . . for the future of Christian leadership it is of vital importance to reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every advice given, and every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately.*

*Christian leaders cannot simply be personas who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them. Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject. But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft and true witnesses without being manipulative.<sup>88</sup>*

*Reality:* We also need to experience the reality of the power and presence of God in our lives before we try to convince others of its relevance. The great danger that emerges when we put the emphasis on relevance is that the real is replaced. A preoccupation with making God’s message relevant to the lives of others can undermine the work of God in us. Sally Morgenthaler suggests five rudders for the ship of worship evangelism. One of them relates to reality and relevance--principle #2 which states, “Never Sacrifice Authenticity for Relevance.” “Rather than asking, ‘How can we attract unbelievers to church?’ start with the question, ‘How can we be real in everything we do?’ Unbelievers aren’t stupid. They can tell the difference between orchestrated piety and the real thing.”<sup>89</sup>

*Redemption:* We need to recognize the basis of reconciliation--the cross of Christ. We should never forget that the gospel alone is the power of God for salvation and, as Paul said, the message of God’s grace is worth expending our lives to make clear to a lost and dying world (Romans 1:16; Acts 20:24). We also need to be reminded that the message of the gospel is primarily a message of redemption; as Sally Morgenthaler puts it, “. . . Paul went beyond cultural relevance; he was culturally redemptive.”<sup>90</sup>

*Relevance:* Finally, we can be sure the message will have relevance to those who are being saved. We need a reminder that although the gospel is the wisdom of God it is foolishness to some and can never be made relevant (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:14).

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<sup>86</sup> Calvin Miller in conversation with Joseph M. Stowell, quoted in *Shepherding the Church Into the 21st Century* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 55.

<sup>87</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 71.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-32.

<sup>89</sup> Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 284.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

Serving up truth to a resistant seeker is rather like trying to get a sick child to take his medicine. Some seeker churches work at relevance as a means of persuading the seeker to see the benefits of taking the same good medicine by which they themselves have been healed--an experience of the life of God in the life of the believer. But other seeker church attempts at relevance are akin to changing the label on the bottle to delude the seeker into believing he is getting something more palatable. They are intellectually dishonest and spiritually dangerous. We should serve the medicine in a way appropriate to the patient and appropriate to the illness without compromising the purity of the medicine.

Joseph Stowell offers these challenging words: “. . . Our fault is not that we are asking how to do church in this new and challenging context or that we are wrestling with how we heal the phenomenal brokenness that increases around us. Our fault is that we are tempted to assume that this new environment changes the target, while our new environment has simply changed the direction and velocity of the wind. An effective shepherd keeps his finger to the wind, adjusts his technique, but never takes his eyes off the center of the target by which his life and divinely prescribed ministry will be measured.”<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

The source of authority for the methods, the message, and the evangelistic ministry of seeker churches must be God and his Word. Some seeker churches have merely copied the methods and strategies of the megachurches--God and his word have been relegated to a secondary place. Some seeker churches have also compromised their “message.” Some have compromised the place for the transcendent and supernatural, some the practice of Biblical preaching and teaching, some the view of the Bible as authoritative, and some have compromised all of the above through an unhealthy emphasis on cultural relevance. By their practice, they reveal a lack of confidence in the power of the gospel. The goal of Biblically pure seeker churches is to create a safe environment for a dangerous message--the focus is on making the environment safe. But for some seeker churches it is the message that has begun to change.

Yet none of these compromises is necessary for a culturally relevant and Biblically pure seeker church. For most seeker churches God and Scripture are foundational to their methods, their “message,” and their evangelistic ministry. They seek, through culturally relevant and Biblically pure ministry, only to create a safe environment for a dangerous message. They may need to wrestle with the centrality of God and Scripture to their methods, and with the Biblical definition of the seeker but they have confidence in the power of the gospel.

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<sup>91</sup> Stowell, *Shepherding the Church*, 12.

## CHAPTER 7

### FOUNDATIONS FOR A BIBLICALLY PURE AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT SEEKER CHURCH

*Our fault is that we are tempted to assume that this new environment changes the target, while our new environment has simply changed the direction and velocity of the wind. An effective shepherd keeps his finger to the wind, adjusts his technique, but never takes his eyes off the center of the target by which his life and divinely prescribed ministry will be measured. Joseph Stowell<sup>92</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

The main concern of the critics in the previous chapters is that seeker churches are not building on Biblical foundations. However, the critics seem to focus most of their attention on the seeker service while ignoring the Biblical rationale that undergirds many seeker churches.<sup>93</sup> The conflict over seeker churches often takes place at this surface level in the local church also. Some believers take issue with the seeker service claiming it is too shallow and does not meet their needs. Conversely, some advocates and proponents take issue with anything in the service that reminds them of the traditional church; they want to eliminate many good practices for fear they will repel the seeker. Vociferous arguments are generated in many churches over the styles of music, the role of drama, the level of seeker-friendliness, the use of multi-media—how contemporary or how traditional the service must be. However, disagreements over services, programs, and strategies often conceal disagreements over issues that are more foundational but rarely discussed. Likewise, discussion and agreement over issues that are more foundational will often result in a willingness to “disagree agreeably” over the content of the programs.

Many critics make much of the fact that the programs of the church should not be adapted to the needs of seekers. Yet, they ignore the tendency of many traditional churches to build programs around the needs of believers. Marketing the church to seekers is certainly wrong but marketing the church to believers (changing programs and ministries to suit their felt needs) is just as harmful to the purpose of the church. Helge Stadelmann argues effectively that the tension between Biblical purity and cultural relevance is just as much an issue for the traditional church. The “culture” to which the traditional church wants to be relevant is that of the believer who prizes the historic traditions of the church. Stadelmann points out that it is just as wrong to compromise Biblical purity by making history a suitable norm for defining the success of the church as it is to make pragmatic measures like size, numbers, or sociologically based church growth principles:

*. . . The mental trap might be to think that as soon as he has established what the “fathers” wrote and ruled on a given point . . . and as soon as it has been shown what the pure and orthodox tradition of his church denomination looked like in the past, this investigator might think that he has established the model upon which to re-form the present practice of the church. This might be designated “traditional” or “confessional” theology. But theological reflection must question whether historical tradition can be the norm for practical theology’s instruction for the action of today’s church. . . .*

*. . . Still others in fact take the different methods and findings of the social sciences as normative. . . . Examples could be multiplied where different insights or methods of psychology, pedagogy, communication theory, etc., are just taken over by practical theologians as standards within their discipline, making practical theology a gathering place of empirical theories with some spiritual application . . . . As long as practical theology is really theology, neither human ideals nor human traditions nor empirical human theories can be the norm, but only the revelation of God as given to us in the Scriptures. Only the biblical Word, rightly understood can be the final norm which enables practical theology to determine the quality of certain church practices and to formulate legitimate instructions for action . . .<sup>94</sup>*

The foundations of the seeker church movement, and of all churches, need to be thoroughly Biblical and not based on the traditional church nor on someone else’s model nor the flimsy foundation of seekers needs. This chapter will look at how a seeker church ministry can be grounded on solid Biblical foundations.

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<sup>92</sup> Stowell, *Shepherding the Church*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Nowhere in any of the books or articles written by critics was reference made to the Biblical basis for seeker church ministry expounded by any of the seeker church proponents. Rick Warren in his book *The Purpose Driven Church* probably has the clearest Biblical rationale for such ministry. Likewise, none of the critics seems to even be aware of the paper put out by the Willow Creek Association, “Defining a Movement: Ten Distinctive Values,” where an attempt is made to expound a Biblical basis for seeker ministry.

<sup>94</sup> Helge Stadelmann, “The Need for Ecclesiological Prolegomena in the Pursuit of Practical Theology,” *Trinity Journal*, Vol. 19 NS, No. 2 Fall 1998, p223-225.

## Holding Lightly to This World and Tightly to The Next

William Crabb and Jeff Jernigan have illustrated the tension between Biblical purity and cultural relevance in their book *The Church in Ruins: Foundations for the Future* (see Figure 4). They say, “In reshaping a philosophy of ministry, we need to keep in mind what is fixed and what is not. A ministry philosophy is a response to two things: the *Word of God*, which does not change; and the *world*, which does.”<sup>95</sup> They continue:

*Knowing that the world changes but the Word doesn't, we need to beware of wrong responses to the pressures for fitting ministry to the audience (contextualization). One response is to simply deny the old patterns and forms. There is great risk in losing touch with transcendent, valuable elements--healthy traditions of ministry--by arbitrarily rejecting old ways. Equally dangerous is uncritically accepting old ways, for this leads to compromise. Whether syncretism results from not shedding things to be rid of or from undiscerningly incorporating the new, it is still death to the gospel message.*

*A ministry philosophy must integrate the old and the new under the critical supervision of the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Our modeling will simply reproduce error if we rely only on our training and conventional human wisdom. Contextualizing ministry is a process of understanding the original purposes of the old, examining the biblical teachings about the matter under scrutiny, evaluating the old in light of these teachings, and prayerfully creating a new practice.<sup>96</sup>*

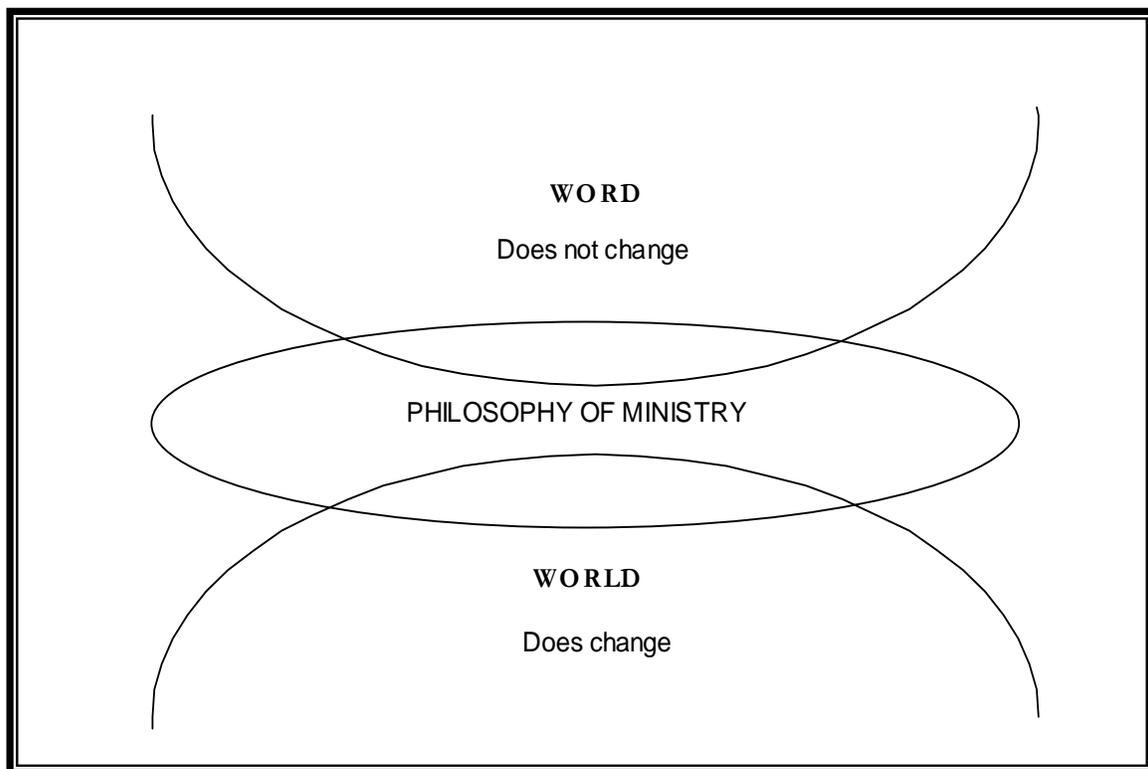


Figure 4. *Word and World*

The appeal of Crabb and Jernigan’s diagram is that it reminds us of the two worlds of ministry--This World and the Next World. Most strategizing spends too much time describing This World, taking surveys, getting control of variables, and relating everything to the perceived needs of seekers in a way, that it is hoped, will bring eternal results. The world offers a better agenda for the methodology and the methodology shapes the principles of the church. Yet too many

<sup>95</sup> Crabb and Jernigan, *The Church in Ruins*, 100.

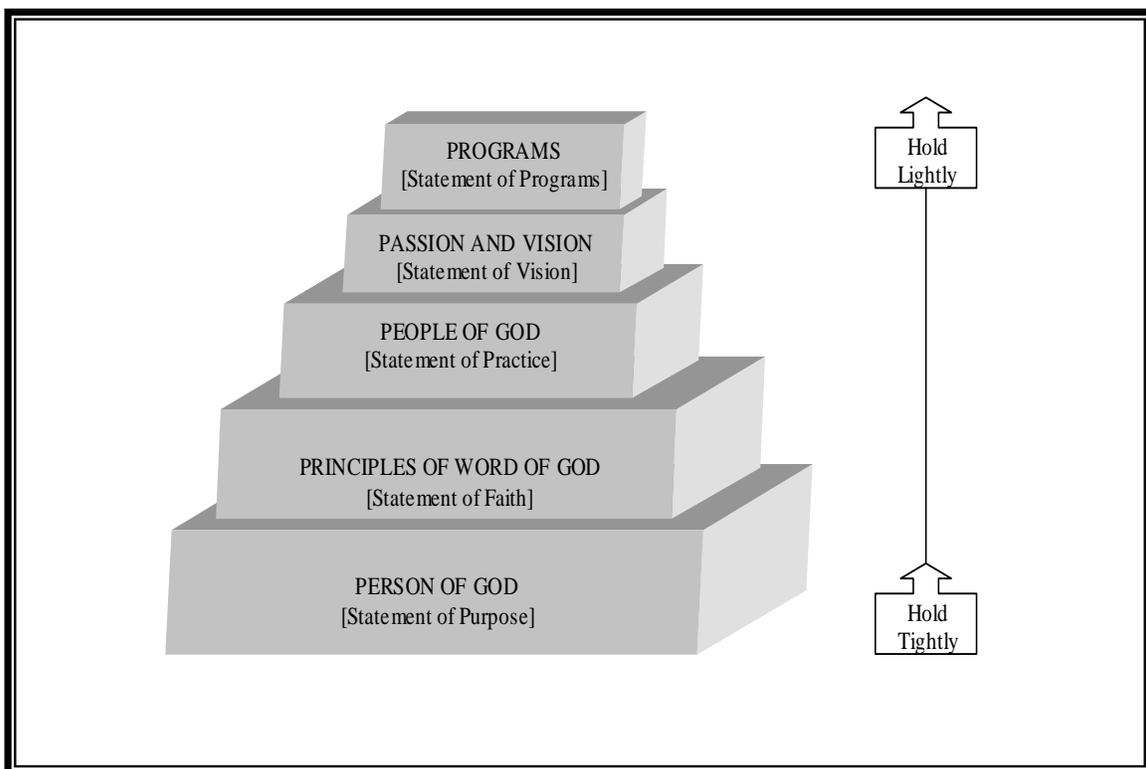
<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

traditional churches spend much of their time reaffirming their beliefs in the Former World and the Next World but rarely change things in This World.<sup>97</sup>

How does a seeker church pay careful attention to the Next World and This World? At Cumberland Community Church, we believe that the only secure foundation for ministry is God himself (See *Figure 5*). We believe that we must hold *tightly* to the things of God that never change and *lightly* to the things of This World that need to change depending on culture and context. The more temporal an aspect of ministry (e.g. Programs) the more lightly we must hold to it; the more eternal it is the more tightly we hold to it. We need to make foundational, and hold tightly to, the things that never change--the Person of God (God's Perfection, his Purposes, and his Presence)--and hold lightly to the things that are temporary (our strategies, our competence, our purposes, and our ways). Programs and methods change; passion and vision change; people change; principles less so. The principles of God's Word are unchanging; so is God himself--he never changes; he is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). This approach to ministry foundations also ensures that it is not the programs that are driving the church. Instead, the person of God determines the Word of God, the Word of God shapes the people of God, the people of God shape the vision for the church, and the vision for the church shapes the programs of the church.

By contrast, some traditional churches and over-zealous seeker churches tend to hold "tightly" to all the insignificant things and "lightly" to the important things. As has been said, much of the conflict that arises in churches seems to arise at the level of Programs. Advocates of the seeker church movement sometimes speak as if the power lies in the strategy--how good the church can be at relating to the needs of seekers. Some critics of the movement talk as if any change in the strategy, methods, or programs of the church necessarily means building on unbiblical foundations.

*Figure 5. Foundations For Ministry*



<sup>97</sup> Admittedly, this presents a simple overview of the task but it illustrates the tension. For a more thorough analysis see Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991). Osborne contends that hermeneutics is a spiral from text to context--a movement between text and reader that spirals nearer and nearer toward the intended meaning of the text and its significance for today.

## The Person of God (Statement of Purpose)

The character of the church is determined by its experience of the presence of God. The foundation for any effective ministry must be great thoughts of God and not great thoughts of man. Packer says:

*... Christian minds have been conformed to the modern spirit: the spirit, that is, that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for only small thoughts of God. The modern way with God is to set him at a distance, if not to deny him altogether; and the irony is that modern Christians, preoccupied with maintaining religious practices in an irreligious world, have themselves allowed God to become remote. Clear-sighted persons, seeing this, are tempted to withdraw from the churches in something like disgust to pursue a quest for God on their own. Nor can one wholly blame them, for churchmen who look at God, so to speak, through the wrong end of the telescope, so reducing him to pigmy proportions, cannot hope to end up as more than pigmy Christians, and clear-sighted people naturally want something better than this. Furthermore, thoughts of death, eternity, judgment, the greatness of the soul and the abiding consequences of temporal decisions are all "out" for moderns, and it is a melancholy fact that the Christian church, instead of raising its voice to remind the world of what is being forgotten, has formed a habit of playing down these themes in just the same way. But these capitulations to the modern spirit are really suicidal so far as Christian life is concerned.<sup>98</sup>*

Four truths about God are the foundation for Biblical ministry for the seeker church or traditional church: God is Holy and is fulfilling his Eternal Purposes in this World, God speaks to us about his purposes, God sends us to accomplish his purposes, and God stays with us while we accomplish his purposes. The church, and seeker churches in particular, need to recapture a sense of wonder at God's holiness, a fresh sense that he speaks today, a new willingness to obey what he is saying, and a deep conviction that it is his presence that makes the difference to their ministry.

### ***God Is Sacred (Holy) And Is Fulfilling His Eternal Purposes In This World***

The source of life for the church is the holiness of God. The source of life for the church is nothing that man can give. It is not great leaders, mature believers, a common mission, clear vision, gifted teachers, a clever strategy, or abundant resources. David Wells reminds us what secures real success before God when he says, "... It will be impossible to recover a vivid otherworldliness and to find sustaining power in the midst of the enormous counterweight of modernity, if we do not recover afresh the meaning of the holiness of God."<sup>99</sup> God is holy--he is perfect in all his ways and his ways are not our ways--our holiness is by derivation; we are holy when we are set apart by God for his purposes and to accomplish his purposes.

In light of God's holiness, the questions that ought to shape a ministry are: What is truly eternal? What will matter long after human history on earth has ended? What will we be doing then that our leadership now should reflect? The books of Genesis and Revelation (and all in between) give insights that cannot come from any other source. Nowhere else are we given an authoritative perspective that steps outside the bounds of time--and yet such perspective is essential. Genesis tells us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. He created them for his purposes. Paul says in Ephesians 1:2-6 that, "... he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." Revelation tells us that by his will we exist and have our being and that eternity will be spent worshiping and serving God. Revelation 4:11 says, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." We will reflect on his creative power and sovereign purposes over all things, ascribing worth to the Lamb who was slain and acknowledging his right to all power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and praise. Revelation 5:12 says, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

A consequent truth that flows from this is that God is fulfilling his holy and eternal purposes here and now in human history. One of the most helpful features of Henry Blackaby's book, *Experiencing God*, is that it describes a God-centered process for knowing and doing the will of God. He suggests seven realities in experiencing God that allow the leader (or any believer) to rest in the person and purposes of God rather than in the person and purposes of the leader. The first reality is that God is always at work around us.<sup>100</sup> He is also at work through us. Indeed, God has created us and raised us

<sup>98</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) 1973, Preface to the 1973 Edition.

<sup>99</sup> Wells, "Marketing the Church," 17-18.

<sup>100</sup> Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 32. Blackaby's Seven Realities of Experiencing God are: 1) God is always at work around you. 2) God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal. 3) God invites you to become involved with Him in His work. 4) God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes and His ways. 5) God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action. 6) You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing. 7) You come to know God by experience as you obey Him and He accomplishes His work through you.

up for the eternal purpose of showing his might, power and glory through us.<sup>101</sup> God's purposes are a greater foundation than our plans. King David took great comfort from knowing that God was accomplishing his purposes through him; Psalm 138:8 says, "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me your love, O LORD, endures forever . . ." Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails." God's purposes for the church are clearly taught in Scripture and include exaltation (the church worshiping God), edification (the church building itself up), evangelism (the church reaching the world), and extension (to serve as a model of Christ's unity, love and concern).<sup>102</sup> The job of the church is to bring this eternal perspective to man's purposes and help men and women see themselves as part of God's eternal purposes.

Since we know that everything is created by God to serve his purposes, and in eternity we will spend our time enjoying his presence, it follows that a working definition of success is *enjoying the presence of God as we fulfill his purposes*.<sup>103</sup> The success that is enjoying the presence of God can bring hope, strength, and purpose. It flows from seeing life and ministry in the larger context of God's eternal purposes. If accomplishments define success then we will give ourselves to those. If we think having a certain kind of church, or level of excellence in ministry, or creativity in programming is the definition of success we strive for that. The problem is most alternative definitions are woefully inadequate to center and stabilize life and ministry; they most often will lead to disillusionment, despair, and even burnout. Fear, anxiety, and stress come from placing trust or confidence in anything in This World that can be taken away from us. We look to many things for consolation that can be lost in the blink of an eye--a successful job, good health, a close friendship, a loving spouse, our children's respect, harmony among leaders, growth in ministry. God wants us to enjoy all of these gifts. James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." But when trust or confidence is placed in the gifts not the giver, when our sense of well-being begins to depend on the gifts rather than the giver, fear and frustration are the result. When we make our goal enjoying the presence of God we are putting our trust and confidence in something that will not be taken away from us (Psalm 139:7-12). Quite apart from dealing with the fears and concerns of leadership, the presence of God is also seen throughout the Bible as the guarantee of success.<sup>104</sup>

### **God Speaks To Us About His Purposes**

In order to accomplish his purposes here on earth, God comes and speaks to someone about his purposes. As Blackaby says, ". . . We do not find God's will--it is revealed. God always takes the initiative."<sup>105</sup> Two convictions are essential for the leader. *First*, he must have a firm conviction based on the experience wrought by obedience that God chooses to accomplish his purposes today by speaking to his servants. *Second*, the leader must have the conviction, carried into practice, that listening to what God is saying is an indispensable part of leadership.

God chooses to accomplish his purposes through people. In the beginning, God accomplished all his creative decrees in Genesis 1 with the power of his word. Repeatedly Moses records from revealed truth "God said . . . and it was so." God created light, land, living things, and everything we see by the power of his word.<sup>106</sup> Between God's purposes and their fulfillment is a Word, a creative command, from God. Amazingly, after Genesis 1, it seems that when God wants to accomplish his eternal purposes he comes to man and speaks to a man or woman about his eternal purposes. God chooses to accomplish what he could with a direct word through a mediated word. He limits himself to fulfilling his purposes through the human beings he has created! This is how God is at work in the world today--he speaks to those he wants involved in his purposes. David Wells talks of "calling as the compelling source of vision, discipline and accountability for every sphere and stage of life."<sup>107</sup> Henry Blackaby says, "When God starts to do something in the world, He takes the

<sup>101</sup> See, for instance, references to God's purposes in Exodus 9:16; Psa 33:10-11; Psa. 57:2; Psa. 138:8; Prov. 19:21; Isa 46:10-11; Acts 2:23; Acts 13:36; Rom. 8:28; Rom. 9:17, 21; Eph. 1:11-12; Eph. 3:10-11; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:8-9.

<sup>102</sup> At CCC we believe that the Church exists: to glorify God (Exaltation: Phil. 2:8-10; Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 6:19; Col. 2:8-10; Col. 1:18; John 19-21; Mark 14-16; Matt. 27-28); to equip disciples for ministry (Edification: Eph. 4:11-13; 2 Tim 4:2-4; Titus 2:15; Gal. 6:1-2; Deut. 6:1-2; 2 Cor 12-14; Rom 12:4-8; Heb. 10:24-25; Heb. 3:13; Titus 3:14; Acts 4:34-35; Acts 2:42ff; Joshua 1:8; Eph. 4:16); to reach North Atlanta and the world (Evangelism: Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; Col. 4:3-6; Mark 16:15; Matt. 5:13-16; Matt. 9:36; Rom. 10:14-17; Matt. 22:37-39; Eph. 3:16-19; Eph. 4:13); and to serve as a model of Christ's unity, love and concern (Extension: Matt 25:34-36; Luke 3:10-14; Luke 4:16-21; Acts 4:34-35; 2 Cor. 10:4; Gal. 6:10; James 2:14-26; James 5:1-5; 1 John 3:16ff).

<sup>103</sup> Another useful definition of success is Rick Warren's; successful ministry is "building the church on the purposes of God in the power of the Holy Spirit and expecting the results from God." in *Purpose Driven Church*, 397.

<sup>104</sup> See, for instance, Genesis 26:3; Genesis 28:15; Genesis 39:2-3; Numbers 14:14; Joshua 1:5; Judges 2:18; 2 Kings 18:7; 1 Chron. 28:20; John 8:29; Acts 18:10.

<sup>105</sup> Blackaby and King, *Experiencing God*, ix.

<sup>106</sup> See Genesis 1:3 light; Genesis 1:6-7 water and clouds; Genesis 1:9 dry ground; Genesis 1:11 vegetation; Genesis 1:14-15 sun, moon and stars; Genesis 1:20 fish and birds; Genesis 1:24 all other living creatures animals; Genesis 1:29-30 food for Adam. See also Hebrews 11:1-3.

<sup>107</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 17.

initiative to come and talk to somebody. For some divine reason, He has chosen to involve His people in accomplishing His purposes. . . Without doubt, the most important factor in each situation was not what the individual wanted to do for God. The most important factor was what God was about to do. . .”<sup>108</sup> Too often, it is easy to think that God expects *us* to make ministry happen instead of aligning ourselves with what he is doing. Blackaby says, “He is the One who is at work, and He alone has the right to take the initiative to begin a work. He does not ask us to dream our dreams for Him and then ask Him to bless our plans. He is already at work when he comes to us. His desire is to get us from where we are to where He is working. When God reveals to you where He is working, that becomes His invitation to join Him. When God reveals His work to you, that is His timing for you to begin to respond to him.”<sup>109</sup> Whenever we see a leader in the Bible acting intentionally to accomplish God’s purposes it is in response to this self-revelation of God. Whether in a vision, a dream, by angelic messenger, or directly, the Bible records hundreds of times, “God spoke to. . .”, “the word of the Lord came to. . .”, “the Holy Spirit spoke. . .” Phrases such as “God spoke”, “the Lord spoke”, “the word of the Lord came to. . .”, occur over 140 times in the Old Testament alone. This does not include many hundreds more occurrences in both Old and New Testaments where God spoke to someone through angelic beings or other human beings.<sup>110</sup> The Holy Spirit also spoke clearly to the New Testament church (see Acts 13:2). For us to understand the purposes of God he must reveal them--or at least that part of them that requires act(s) of obedience on our part. Blackaby says, “God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes and His ways.”<sup>111</sup>

*Second*, the leader must be convinced of the need to listen to God. Blackaby says, “We do not sit down and dream what we want to do for God and then call God in to help us accomplish it. The pattern in the Scripture is that we submit ourselves to God and we wait until God shows us what He is about to do, or we watch to see what God is doing around us and join Him.”<sup>112</sup> An essential practice for any leader, and perhaps the most neglected, is the art of listening to God. From Abraham to Paul we see leaders who had an encounter with the Living God and live their leadership out of that encounter. It is not that God reveals his whole plan from beginning to end but rather he wants someone who is willing to take the next clear step in accomplishing his purposes. To build a seeker church on solid foundations requires the courage to give careful attention to what God’s Spirit might be saying to the church.

The role of prayer in listening to God before rushing off with ministry plans and methods is essential. Indeed, it is not possible to fully enjoy the presence of God if we are busy with plans he has not given us. Worship is also an important daily activity for the believer and the central activity of the church—especially for a church that wishes to be evangelistically effective. Spending time in the presence of God in prayer and worship prepares us to go into the world with a message from the heart of God. Isaiah had a vision of God in worship and was then asked if he was willing to be sent to the people with a message from God (Isaiah 6:1-10). The Angel Gabriel’s announcement to Zechariah with good news is preceded by Gabriel “standing in the presence of God”: “The angel answered, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news’” (Luke 1:19 NIV). The early church spent a time in worship and prayer and the Holy Spirit spoke about the next missionary undertaking for Saul and Barnabas: “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2 NIV). Henri Nouwen’s insight is timely: “It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, ‘Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?’”<sup>113</sup>

Time spent in God’s presence in personal worship and prayer also prepares us to persevere when obeying God’s call does not bring instant results. When we worship authentically, we are reminded of what is important. We take our eyes off the false center of our own universe and put them back on the reality of God and his World. Our sense of well-being is restored not through the false confidence that comes from experiencing pleasant circumstances and ministry success but from a focus on the central reality of life and eternity--the person of Almighty God. When we are worried by someone’s fickle loyalty we can come back to God and praise him for his faithfulness; we are transformed by embracing that which will never change or turn against us (Romans 8:1). When we feel powerless to change our circumstances, we come back to

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<sup>108</sup> Blackaby and King, *Experiencing God*, 66.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, Numbers 22:35; 2 Kings 1:3; 2 Kings 1:15; Zech. 1:12; Zech. 3:4; Matthew 28:5; Luke 1:13; Luke 1:30; Luke 2:10; Acts 8:26; Acts 4:8; Acts 12:8; Rev. 17:7; Rev. 17:15; Rev. 19:9; Rev. 22:6.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>112</sup> Blackaby and King, *Experiencing God*, 66.

<sup>113</sup> Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 29-30.

God and feast our soul on his omnipotence. When someone doubts our competence and belittles our efforts, we return to listen to our Heavenly Father speak promises of hope, promises of a future and promises to prosper not to harm us (Jer 29:11). King David seems to have known this; not only was he Israel's greatest leader but also Israel's greatest Psalmist.

Amidst all the uncertainties of ministry, in the face of leadership challenges, limited resources, unending needs and a multitude of opinions, the leader must be able to rest in the eye of the storm, connecting with the unchanging character of God.

### ***God Sends Us To Accomplish His Purposes***

If the leadership of a church is going to help the church fulfill God's purposes they must know they are sent by God. The Bible has numerous references to God "sending" a leader and the concept seems to have given great leaders their greatest sense of security. Joseph was able to say to his brothers, "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt" (Genesis 45:8). Moses also experienced a commission from God; he was told, "So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). When Moses faced opposition, as all sent leaders will do, he reminded the people that his plans were not his own but from God, who sent him: "Then Moses said, 'This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea. . .'" (Numbers 16:28). Gideon knew he could rely on God's commission: "The LORD turned to him and said, 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?'" (Judges 6:14). Perhaps the greatest example of a leader who knew he was sent by God was Jesus himself. Over 49 times in the New Testament (39 times in John's gospel alone) Jesus is referred to, by himself or others, as one sent by the Father. Jesus taught that his purpose (Matt. 15:24 Luke 4:43, John 3:16-34:38-39), his power and authority (John 5:30-44) and even his very teaching (John 3:34 7:16 8:26 14:24), derived from being sent by his Father in heaven. Likewise, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out as men sent on a mission, deriving their purpose, power, authority and teaching directly from him and ultimately from the Father. He said, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). Paul said he and his companions conducted their ministry "like men sent from God" (2 Cor. 2:17) and he withstood leadership challenges based upon his being "sent not from men nor by men" (Gal. 1:1). This was not an attempt to place himself above criticism or accountability since Paul often allowed the counsel of fellow believers to guide him. It is an indication that Paul believed unless a leader knows he has been sent by God he will not have the fortitude to go in the direction he has been sent when so many others call and command him in other directions.<sup>114</sup>

### ***God Stays With Us To Accomplish His Purposes***

The Bible portrays its leaders as very human and very prone to all the leadership concerns and fears of a twentieth century leader, even though they may know they are sent by God himself. For example, Moses expressed a sense of personal inadequacy in Exodus 3:11: "But Moses said to God, 'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'" Moses also expressed pain over the isolation of leadership and asked God to teach him God's ways; Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people" (Exodus 33:12-13). Gideon also expressed a sense of personal inadequacy in Judges 6:15: "'But Lord,' Gideon asked, 'how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.'" God reassured those he had sent that there was no need to fear--a sure indication that fear is a common leadership experience. Whether it is fear of the task

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<sup>114</sup> See these references for the concept of being 'sent by God': Genesis 45:5; Genesis 45:7-8; Exodus 3:10; Exodus 3:12-15; Exodus 4:13; Exodus 4:28; Exodus 5:22; Exodus 7:16; Exodus 33:12-16; Numbers 16:28-30; Deut. 6:22; Deut. 9:23; Joshua 1:16; Joshua 14:7; Joshua 14:11; Joshua 24:2-5; Judges 6:11-16; 1 Samuel 2:6-8; 1 Samuel 9:16; 1 Samuel 12:8; 1 Samuel 12:11; 1 Samuel 15:17-19; 1 Samuel 16:1; 1 Samuel 20:22; 2 Samuel 12:1; Isaiah 63:11-12; Matthew 10:5-10; Matthew 10:16; Matthew 10:40; Matthew 11:10; Matthew 15:24; Matthew 21:37; Matthew 23:34; Matthew 23:37; Mark 1:2; Mark 1:12; Mark 3:14; Mark 6:7-11; Mark 9:37; Mark 12:2-6; Luke 1:19; Luke 1:26-28; Luke 4:18; Luke 4:43; Luke 7:27; Luke 9:1-6; Luke 9:48; Luke 10:1-12; Luke 10:16; Luke 11:49; Luke 13:34; Luke 20:10-13; Luke 22:35-37; Luke 24:49; John 1:6; John 1:33; John 3:17; John 3:28; John 3:34; John 4:34; John 4:38; John 5:22-24; John 5:30; John 5:36-38; John 6:29; John 6:38-39; John 6:44; John 6:57; John 7:16; John 7:18; John 7:28-29; John 7:33; John 8:16; John 8:18; John 8:26; John 8:29; John 8:42; John 9:4; John 11:42; John 12:44-45; John 12:49; John 13:16; John 13:20; John 14:24; John 14:26; John 15:21; John 15:26; John 16:5; John 16:7; John 17:3; John 17:8; John 17:18; John 17:21; John 17:23; John 17:25; John 20:21; Acts 7:4; Acts 7:33-38; Acts 9:17; Acts 13:3-4; Acts 15:3; Acts 22:21; Acts 26:17; Romans 10:15; 1 Cor. 1:17; 2 Cor. 2:17; Galatians 1:1; 1 John 4:9-10; 1 John 4:14.

itself, fear of opposition, fear of personal inadequacy or other kinds of fear, the Bible records God, directly or indirectly, reassuring leaders that there is no need for fear on numerous occasions.<sup>115</sup>

In almost every one of these occasions God promises one thing to placate the fears and concerns of the leader--his presence alone and the conviction that as the leader does what he has been sent to do, God will accomplish his purposes. Hundreds of instances can be found in the Bible where God promises to be "with" someone or promises his presence in some other way. God reassured Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and many others that the means to accomplish what he purposed for them was for them to obey and trust his presence with them.<sup>116</sup> When Moses expresses personal inadequacy, God says in Exodus 3:12 "I will be with you." When Moses shares his sense of isolation God replies in Exodus 33:14 "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." When Gideon wavers, God reassures him in Judges 6:16 The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

### The Principles and Power of God's Word (Statement of Faith)

The character of the church is also shaped by its source of truth and the centrality of that truth in its ministry. Clearly, God does not always speak to leaders today through angels, dreams and personal appearances, but he does continue to speak through his Word. John Stott in *Between Two Worlds* puts it this way, "God still speaks through what He has spoken."<sup>117</sup> David Wells says it well under the heading "What Scripture says, God says":

*Without this transcendent Word in its life, the church has no rudder, no compass, no provisions. Without the Word, it has no capacity to stand outside its culture, to detect and wrench itself free from the seductions of modernity. Without the Word, the church has no meaning. It may seek substitutes for meaning in committee work, relief work, and various other church activities, but such things cannot fill the role for very long. Cut off from the meaning that God has given, faith cannot offer anything more by way of light in our dark world than what is offered by philosophy, psychology, or sociology. Cut off from God's meaning, the church is cut off from God; it loses its identity as the people of God in belief, in practice, in hope. Cut off from God's Word, the church is on its own, left to live for itself, by itself, upon itself. It is never lifted beyond itself above its culture. It is never stretched or tried. It grows more comfortable, but it is the comfort of anaesthesia, of a refusal to pay attention to the disturbing realities of God's truth. . . .*

*. . . Only those who are countercultural by way of being other-worldly have what modern culture most needs to hear--a Word from God that can cut through the deceits of modernity to reach the hearts that lie within. These are the people for whom God has weight, and, because of this, they themselves have weight. In contrast, it is this worldly Christianity, not merely in the old liberal forms but increasingly in the evangelical church today, that produces weightlessness in God and in its purveyors. It spreads something light and superficial, a mere gloss on modernity, under the illusion that it is actually offering the antidote to modernity.<sup>118</sup>*

If we as leaders do not fundamentally believe that God speaks to us today through his Word we will not search it and soak in it with the same passion. That passion ought to be that our very lives and ministries depend on it. We cannot know what he wants us to say and do and how he wants us to say and do it by attending conferences and seminars if we are not intently seeking to discover his ways as revealed in his Word. The content of the Bible must be the foundation of the church's doctrine, the mainstay of the church's teaching, the source of the church's principles for ministry, and the evident guidance for the practice of the church. The elders of the church are to give themselves to prayer and "the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:4). Thesis One of the Cambridge Declaration, *Sola Scriptura*, reminds us: "We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured . . ."<sup>119</sup>

This foundation will certainly include the church's Statement of Faith--that is the essential doctrines that define what the church believes about the central issues of the Christian faith--God, the Bible, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, etc. A Statement of Faith ought to be more than a list of preferred doctrines to help define the church for members and potential

<sup>115</sup> See, for example: to Abraham in Gen 15:1, to Moses in Num. 21:34, to Joshua in Joshua 8:1, to Jehoshaphat in 2 Chron. 20:15-17, and to Paul in Acts 18:19. See also Genesis 21:17; Genesis 26:24; Genesis 46:3; Deut. 3:2; Deut. 31:6; Deut. 31:8; Joshua 10:8; Joshua 11:6; Judges 6:23; 2 Kings 1:15; 2 Kings 19:6; 1 Chron. 28:20; 2 Chron. 20:15; 2 Chron. 32:7; Isaiah 10:24; Isaiah 37:6; Isaiah 40:9; Isaiah 41:14; Isaiah 43:5; Isaiah 44:2; Isaiah 44:8; Isaiah 54:4; Jeremiah 1:8; Jeremiah 42:11; Ezekiel 2:6; Ezekiel 3:9; Daniel 10:12; Daniel 10:18-19; Zech. 8:13; Zech. 8:15; Matthew 1:20; Matthew 10:26; Matthew 10:28; Matthew 28:5; Matthew 28:10; Luke 1:13; Luke 1:30; Luke 2:10; Luke 12:4; Luke 12:32; John 12:15; John 14:27; Acts 27:23-24; Rev. 1:17; Rev. 2:10.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Genesis 3:8-9; 2 Chron. 6:18; Psalm 23:6; Psalm 27:4-5; Psalm 31:20; Psalm 46:4; Psalm 61:4; Psalm 90:1-2; Psalm 91:1-2; Psalm 91:9-12; Isaiah 57:15; Matthew 18:20; Matthew 28:20; John 1:14; John 8:29; John 14:15-23; John 15:4-5; John 17:20-23; Romans 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; Galatians 2:20; Ephes. 2:22; Ephes. 3:16-17; Philip. 4:9; Col. 1:19; Col. 1:27; Col. 2:9; 2 Tim. 1:14; 1 John 2:5; 1 John 2:15; 1 John 3:17; 1 John 3:24; 1 John 4:12; 1 John 4:15-16; Rev. 3:20; Rev. 7:15; Rev. 21:3.

<sup>117</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 100.

<sup>118</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 150-151.

<sup>119</sup> "The Cambridge Declaration," 4.

members. It should be a summary of the foundational, non-negotiable principles of the Word of God from which all truth will be taught and all relevant ministry will flow. As David Wells says:

*This is why the apostles not only framed Christian truth in doctrinal terms but called for its preservation and protection in this form. There is no Christian faith in the absence of "sound doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10; Tit. 1:9), "sound instruction" (1 Tim. 6:3), or "the pattern of sound teaching" (2 Tim. 1:13-14). It is this doctrine, or, more precisely, the truth it contains and expresses, that was "taught" by the apostles and "delivered" to the Church. It is this message that is our only ground for hope (Tit. 1:9) and salvation (1 Cor. 15:2; 1 Pet 1:23-25). Without it, we have neither the Father nor the Son (2 John 9). Indeed, Paul says that we can grow in Christ only if we stay within this doctrinal framework, for its truth provides the means of our growth (Col. 2:6). It is no wonder that Christians are urged not to depart from the apostolic teaching they received "in the beginning" (John 2:7,24,26; 3:11) or from what they had heard (Heb. 2:1), for it is the "faith once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). Nor should we be amazed to read of Paul's admonition to Timothy that it is only by adhering to this "good teaching" that he will become a "good minister of Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 4:6). For all of these reasons, the apostles instructed believers to "guard" this faith (2 Tim. 1:13-14; 4:3; cf. Tit. 1:9; Gal. 1:9), "defend" it (Jude 3), "stand firm" in it, not to "drift" from it, to become "established" in it, and to transmit it intact to succeeding generations.<sup>120</sup>*

Seeker churches have rightly pointed out that engaging the seeker directly with our traditional doctrinal convictions and formulations is not the best approach. We need to remember as Frederick Buechner said that all doctrine started not as doctrine but as an experience.<sup>121</sup> Men met with God and under his guidance wrote about their experiences. The inspired record of those experiences forms the basis of our doctrine. Too many believers think they mature by amassing greater knowledge of the doctrines which describe the experiences of others. They also seek to engage others with doctrinal convictions rather than an offer to experience the living God. Yet, in reaching out to the seeker we must always do it from the foundation of deeply held doctrinal convictions that then help us formulate the message that we communicate. The seeker church leaders must have confidence that the Word of God can change lives today. The Word of God itself is living and active (Heb. 4:12). The Word of God is powerful (2 Cor. 10:4-5; Eph. 6:17). When Jesus spoke, with a word limbs were healed, at a word blind eyes were given sight, with a command dead men were raised to life and evil spirits were banished.<sup>122</sup> Today, as he speaks a word to the church great things can happen. To cite David Olsson again as he clarifies doctrinal purity in the Willow Creek Association position paper, "When it comes to communicating the gospel, 'remaining doctrinally pure' means that a church does not ignore, massage, manipulate or otherwise distort the fundamental truths revealed in the Bible, but instead displays an unflinching adherence to and unapologetic proclamation of biblical truth."<sup>123</sup>

The seeker church pastor must maintain his belief in the power of God's Word above the power of vision, mission, or any man-centered strategy. A deeper foundation needs to support and prescribe the methods and strategies of ministry--the unchanging principles found in God's Word. The old dictum is true, "Methods are many, principles few, methods always change, principles never do." Seeker churches which emulate only the strategies of flagship churches in attempts to grow the church will find that as the fashion changes they cannot discern the temporal from the eternal; they will be ill equipped to adapt their ministry to the next generation. They will be locked in conflict when the time comes to change their methods and they will lack the spiritual stamina to maintain their ministry.

## **The People of God (Statement of Practice)**

The character of the church is also shaped by the extent to which God and his word is shaping the character of the people. The beliefs of God's people need to translate into the behavior that fits the people of God. As important as it is to have a Statement of Faith (orthodoxy) it is vital that right beliefs manifest themselves in specific behaviors (orthopraxy). Many traditional churches that have a solid Biblical foundation and view themselves as "teaching centers" fail to lead their people in doing the work of the ministry that the Bible teaches. The people at such churches can rightly divide the Word of truth and pass on sound doctrine but rarely see the relevance or impact of all the teaching on their non-believing friends. Too many Christians in such an environment view Christianity as a spectator sport or are playing on the field without knowing where the goals are.

It is for these reasons we have a Statement of Practice at CCC (see Appendix J). The Statement of Practice is a Biblical definition and practical description of a fully devoted follower; it is a description of what enjoying the presence of God and building our lives around his Word looks like. It is a recognition of the priesthood of the believer--the church is much

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<sup>120</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 103.

<sup>121</sup> From the authors notes--source unknown.

<sup>122</sup> See Matthew 4:4; Matthew 8:3; Matthew 8:5-13; Matthew 8:16-17; Matthew 8:23-27; Matthew 9:20-22; Matthew 10:1; Matthew 12:9-14; Matthew 15:28; Matthew 17:18; Matthew 21:19; Matthew 24:35; Mark 1:27; Mark 1:34; Mark 1:41-42; Mark 3:2; Mark 3:10; Mark 4:38-41; Mark 5:21-24; Mark 5:35-42; Mark 9:17-29; Mark 10:51-52; Luke 4:39-41; Luke 5:13; Luke 5:17-26; Luke 7:1-17; Luke 8:22-37; Luke 8:47-56; Luke 9:37-42; Luke 18:41-43; Luke 22:51; Luke 24:39; John 4:46-51; John 15:3

<sup>123</sup> Olsson, "Defining a Movement," 3.

more than the sum total of the vision and gifts of its leaders--whether they are elders, staff, or pastors. What are the characteristics of people who build their lives around God and his word? What is a basic working model of a Christian? They are people who know *the grace of God* in their lives and are committed to following Jesus Christ above all else.

*Committed to the Master*, they are people who believe that enjoying the presence of God is the definition of success (Statement of Practice #1); they are people of worship (Statement #2), people of the Word (Statement #3), and people of prayer (Statement #4). They are also people committed to *growing* as believers; *Committed to Maturity* they believe that pursuing full devotion to Christ is the norm not the exception for the Christian life (Statement #5) and that believers grow best in Biblical community (Statement #6). They are also people committed to *giving* in ministry; *Committed to Ministry* they operate as a unified community of servants stewarding their spiritual gifts and their financial resources (Statement #7 and #8). Finally they are a people committed to *going* with God's Word to the last, the least and the lost—they are *Committed to Missions* (Statement #9,10,11,12).

Biblically the health or strength of the church is not dependent upon its size but upon the experience of God's power in the lives of its members. A large church may only be a church with many people but not a truly Biblical megachurch. A true megachurch is one that experiences God's "incomparably great power" as described in Ephesians 1:19 (Ephes. 1:18-21 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,<sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength,<sup>20</sup> which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,<sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come). His "incomparably great power" is his "exceeding" (hyperballon--surpassing, unlimited, immeasurable, beyond imagination) power. In fact, the word for "great" describing the power in Ephesians 1:19 is *megethos* meaning "mighty, explosive, beyond measure." This is the word from which we get the English word megathon which measures atomic explosives. A church that is operating with this power at work in its people is a Biblical megachurch. It is what Cliff Schimmels calls "the power of God at work in ordinary people." Describing the stories he heard in Sunday School he says, "The curriculum is filled with such stories. The sea parted, the walls fell down, the clothes didn't wear out, the sun stood still, the lame man walked, the fishnets didn't break, and the virgin gave birth. The whole church is filled with the stories of the unbelievable. Mrs. Metcalf had polio when she was a little girl. The doctors said she would never walk again, but now she doesn't even limp. Mr. Robinson was once a brawler and a drunk, but now he isn't. Sunday School is about both kinds of stories because it's about the power of God at work in ordinary people."<sup>124</sup>

Church leaders should not only exemplify the characteristics described in the Statement of Practice but character should be the primary qualification for church leadership (1 Tim. 3:1-7; 1 Tim. 5:17-20; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5). There is a tendency in the seeker church movement to look to leadership giftedness before character and calling.<sup>125</sup> This is seen in the heavy emphasis on the church being led by gifted leaders (who, it is suggested, may or may not be pastor-teachers). This potentially harms the church by substituting the primary role of the Word of God shaping the character of the church through the ministry of pastor-teachers for the role of competent and effective leaders trying to bring about the same results. The Biblical emphasis is on called pastor-teachers who have the character qualifications to serve as elders and the giftedness to lead or govern (Romans 12:8; 1 Tim. 3:4-5; 5:17). Such an over-emphasis on the competence and effectiveness of leadership may also discourage many pastors who are otherwise God's men for the church. Comparing themselves to gifted lay leaders they may see themselves coming up short and acquiesce to the leadership of others based on the appearance of their greater competence. Leadership based on a productivity or personality ethic instead of a character and calling ethic will do great damage to the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it well, "The church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren. The question of trust, which is so closely related to that of authority, is determined by the faithfulness with which a man serves Jesus Christ, never by extraordinary talent which he possesses. Pastoral authority can only be attained by the servant of Jesus Christ who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers submitted to the authority of the Word."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Cliff Schimmels, *I Learned It First In Sunday School*, 15.

<sup>125</sup> For a while, inspired by Willow Creek, many saw 'visionary leadership' as the key. I am not suggesting that churches be leaderless or be led by poor leaders. But 'giftedness in leadership' should never cause someone to be thrust into the position of primary leader especially when it preempts the role and function of the pastor-teacher feeding and guiding the church by the Word of God. The emphasis in Ephesians 4:11-12 regarding those given to the church by God, is not on leadership giftedness but on called people, speaking and teaching with words from God, (Ephes. 4:11-12 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up [NIV]).

<sup>126</sup> From the authors notes--source unknown.

## The Passion And Vision Of God's Church (Statement of Vision/Passion)

The character of the church is also shaped by its vision and passion. Once the foundations of the person of God (Statement of Purpose), the principles and power of God's Word (Statement of Faith), and the people of God (Statement of Practice) have been laid it is time to address the vision and passion of God's church. To the extent that the first three foundations are universally applicable to all churches (and they should be) they are not the distinctive of seeker churches. Again, churches that are part of the seeker movement ought to be more aware of what they have in common with dynamic Biblical churches than they are aware of their differences and distinctives (Ephesians 4:3-6).<sup>127</sup> Most often, passion and vision will be an expression of the leadership of the church and the senior pastor, using their gifts of leadership and discernment for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Peter 4:10-11). This step allows for the full expression of the tremendous creativity of God in leading and guiding a local church to be a unique expression of the body of Christ in a local setting.

Most churches that are part of the seeker church movement would recognize their passion and vision to be Biblically functioning communities that are evangelistically effective. A Biblical vision statement should be determined by a combination of the resources of its people and the needs in the community and world.<sup>128</sup> George Barna says, "Vision is specific, detailed, customized, distinctive and unique to a given church . . . The vision statement puts 'feet' on the mission, detailing how the church will influence the world in which it will minister."<sup>129</sup> Vision is specific and unique to a given church and will have relevance to the local situation in which the church is ministering. The vision statement for Cumberland Community Church is "Our vision is to seek God as we develop a Spirit-filled biblical community where unchurched people become fully developing followers of Christ. As it relates to North Atlanta our vision is to introduce the unchurched of the area to Jesus Christ in an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and forgiveness through a non-threatening and culturally sensitive approach; win them to Christ, build them up in Christ and send them out for Christ into neighborhoods, homes and the marketplace. Specifically we will be a church of 1-2,000 with a culturally relevant, Biblically pure ministry which can resource churches around Atlanta and around the world to carry out similar ministries." The passionate commitment to follow through with the vision is as important as the vision itself; it has been well said that the leader must have the vision for what can be built over a lifetime and the patience to build it one brick at a time.

The point is often made in the seeker church movement that a clear vision ought to be the place from which leaders lead and is the primary role of the leader. Vision, it is said, gives us the "next step" in God's purposes for us. Vision, it is suggested, provides a sense of direction, the basis for unity, the basis for necessary change, motivation to involvement, reasons for giving, and a basis for evaluation. When asked by Kimon Sargeant to identify the most important tasks upon which pastors should focus their efforts, 99.1% of his survey population (pastors of seeker churches) responded that casting a vision was very important.<sup>130</sup>

While it is important for leaders to have vision, the premise that few things are more critical to leadership success than clear and compelling vision and values in a ministry seems to arise more from secular culture than Biblical reflection. Books on vision by Christian authors seem to reflect increasingly their secular counterparts. Clear Biblical references to vision in the sense it is often used are lacking. Nor does the Bible teach that a leader must have this characteristic. After three years with Jesus, the disciples still leaned toward interpreting his vision as earthly and temporal (Acts 1:6-7). The Bible records people who far from being ready, willing, and able when it came to "vision" were often unready, unwilling, and unable. Nehemiah is a glorious exception in a cast of characters that were met by God at his initiative, given instructions to obey, and promised only the comfort of God's presence for their fear. God has his eternal purposes but he sometimes chooses to reveal only a part of them to us. Indeed, I may only know a small part of the total picture, but a part large enough to obey when God reveals himself to me. Similarly, the idea of "values" while capturing some of the common understanding of the marketplace loses the common foundation of Biblical truth. Many rightly perceive the authority of a "value" to be established by the mere fact that an individual or group chooses it to be valued; its validation lies in the choice of the group or person. While this is acceptable in the marketplace of consumer driven choices (although even there Biblical principles would be a better platform on which to build), it is unnecessary in the church. Where a body of transcendent, revealed truth exists, Biblical principles are discovered not decided upon.

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<sup>127</sup> Although the WCA document, *Defining a Movement: Ten Distinctive Values*, is very helpful and Biblically based, it calls its Biblical principles 'distinctive values' when in fact they are foundational to all Biblical churches; 'distinctive values' would be a better description of areas where seeker churches truly do ministry in a different way (strategy and style) than other Biblical churches.

<sup>128</sup> Faith is essential to 'see' the resources and needs that may not actually have yet materialized! (Hebrews 11:6).

<sup>129</sup> George Barna, *The Power of Vision* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 39.

<sup>130</sup> Sargeant, "Willow Creek Survey," 3. The other answers were: Shepherding staff and lay leaders—'very important' (75.6%). Theological learning (31.1%) and managing the church (15.1%) 'very important.' And learning more about theology (54.1%) and managing the church's programs (31.1%) were considered 'somewhat important.'

The concept of vision has a number of other dangers associated with it. It is appealing to the ego to consider oneself a “visionary leader.” Such a view of leadership is as likely to give rise to an ego-inspired vision as opposed to a Spirit-inspired vision. A temptation lurks for some to think of themselves as “visionary leaders” and to applaud themselves into places of prominence within the church (as most seem to do when applying that epithet to themselves). In the presence of such leadership, one often becomes more aware of the greatness of the leader than the greatness of God. This is the antithesis of Biblical servant-leadership and often viewing oneself as a visionary leader is another way of implying that we control what and where the church will be in the future. Compound that with the disdain for “managing” anything as opposed to “leading” it and the church may now suffer from a surfeit of self-appointed, ego-inspired, “visionary leaders.” If Ken Blanchard is right and “Change comes more from managing the journey than announcing the destination,” then both managerial roles and a leadership roles are appropriate for the pastor—and most of all a shepherding role.

It is also very difficult to distinguish true vision from the expectations of success in ministry (one’s own expectations and others). We are often like the lady who stepped into an elevator and told the operator: “The eleventh floor, please.” He asked politely, “Whom did you wish to see on the eleventh floor?” She snapped back, “That’s none of your business, young man.” “I’m not being nosy lady, it’s just that this building only has eight floors.” Sadly, for some pastors in the seeker church movement, their vision has been no more than their own expectations of themselves and others couched in language of what God was going to do. They see Willow Creek, they attend a Saddleback seminar and despite all the verbal warnings to the contrary, they leave thinking that what they have seen can be replicated. As C. S. Lewis has observed, “encore” is the one prayer God may never grant.<sup>131</sup> Despite protestations to the contrary by the flagship churches, the power of the presentation implies “you too can achieve this if you expect to.” Some have; success stories abound in the seeker church movement and because of thousands of churches attempting this style of ministry some are bound to “get it right.” Hundreds more fail. The seeker church movement lies littered with the wrecks of those who have hitched their wagon to a star and crashed when they failed to live up to the expectations of themselves and others.<sup>132</sup>

Vision is also suspect when it relates primarily to size and success of the church rather than character and conduct of God’s people. If a vision relates to the temporal aspects of ministry—buildings, size, programs, places, strategies and methods—the more lightly it should be held. The more it relates to the eternal aspects of ministry—the person and presence of God, the principles of the Word of God, the character and conduct of God’s people and their effect on the world—the more tightly it should be held. Better to build on the person of God, and the principles of his Word, than our understanding of what we think we can “see” in terms of personal or organizational vision. In imposing our vision on the local church a danger exists that we treat superficially the vision God has already given us for a local church in the Bible (a family—a vision of intimacy, a body—a vision of unity, a bride—a vision for purity, a building—a vision for solid foundations, etc.). Along with this vision of the church comes the means of measuring its true success—mostly unrelated to its size. Bill Hull puts it this way: “It is very much in vogue for a consultant to ask church leaders, ‘What do you want your church to be? Figure out your needs and desires, tell me where you want to go, and I will help you craft a philosophy that will take you there.’ Such people are asking the wrong question! The right question is, In Scripture, what does God say the church is? Based on that, we need to ask, Where should it go and how should it behave? Then we must ask, What does Scripture define as a need and how should it be met?”<sup>133</sup>

Leading from vision also can preempt the desire to walk with God in daily dependence; we know our vision better than we know God. We fall into the trap of rallying around a vision rather than rallying around the person and presence of God and his Word. Prayerfulness and dependence is a preferred posture to discover what God wants for the leader or the church in five or ten years. What is often lost in “casting a vision” is a willingness to listen and obey what Almighty God himself calls us to. Are we really listening to him? Or are we listening to the echo of our own egos?

Most importantly of all, a vision needs to be held to less tightly than the ideal of the Biblical community. Visionary leaders can often put their dreams ahead of the community. They impose their expectations and ideals on the community—God’s people become a means to an end. When their dreams are not realized someone else gets the blame. Often such leaders will initiate a great effort and then drift or lose interest because they have begun to judge the community by the expectations of their dream. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it so well in *Life Together*:

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<sup>131</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), 27.

<sup>132</sup> George Barna, a Willow Creek advocate, acknowledges and laments this in the Introduction to his book *User Friendly Churches*, but he blames it on a lack of understanding of vision as the foundation for the church. Barna, *User Friendly Churches*, 18-20. The Willow Creek Association affiliate in the U.K. had this to say as they reviewed the success of seeker churches in the U.K., “Back in ’92, when the first Willow Creek team came to do a CLC here, UK leaders who attended were naturally deeply impressed with the new ways of doing church. Looking back, we realize that the idea of the “seeker service” was the main element many leaders took back to their home church, often choosing to ignore the far wider strategy of which seeker services were only a small part. In the years following the first CLC, many UK churches have attempted doing seeker services expecting that growth would naturally come as a result. In many cases, the demands seeker services placed on churches became too great, and disillusionment with Willow Creek principles resulted.” (WCA Newsletter Jan/Feb 1999).

<sup>133</sup> Hull, *Building High Commitment*, 60.

*... He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.*

*God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. . . . He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.<sup>134</sup>*

Jim Bakker, head of the PTL empire until he spent five years in federal penitentiary for financial wrongdoing, was profoundly affected by Bonhoeffer's words. We can learn about the dark side of vision from his reflections:

*God had been showing me that one of my most tragic mistakes in life was in allowing my vision of Heritage USA to become the focal point of PTL rather than keeping the gospel of Jesus Christ as our top priority. When I read Bonhoeffer's words, they seemed to leap off the pages at me. Written in 1938, two years before I was born, Bonhoeffer wrote:*

*"Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it has sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. . . . God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions but the God of truth. . . . A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse. . . . He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intention may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial."*

*Ouch! Bonhoeffer's words hit me right between the eyes. I did not like to see myself reflected on the pages, especially to think of myself as the destroyer of the very community I had hoped to build because of my love for my dream. But the message got worse before it got better: "God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious."*

*What? Surely, Mr. Bonhoeffer, you must be joking! After all, my friends and admirers had been telling me for years that I was a visionary, a dreamer of great dreams. I saw myself that way and considered my visionary dreaming to be one of my better qualities. Surely there must be some mistake. . . . There was, and I had made it.*

*As Bonhoeffer's words sank into my heart, mind, and spirit, I was suddenly more deeply grieved than ever before that Heritage USA, my dream, had been the cause of so much infighting, hurt, and shame in the Body of Christ. I never intended it to be so, but as Bonhoeffer said, that is irrelevant. My dream turned into a nightmare. The world watched as Christian leaders fought over who would get "the box." Fellow believers betrayed one another in their efforts at gamesmanship. Money and buildings were more important than obedience to God's word and reaching the souls of men and women with the gospel. When the world looked and saw PTL, they saw Christians, a relatively small number of Christians to be sure, at their worst. . . . and that included me.*

*We had so much going for us. People were meeting Jesus at Heritage USA. Lives were truly changed. Marriages were restored and healed. Unborn babies were saved and unmarried mothers were supported as they began a new quality of life. The gospel was broadcasted daily around the world. Witnesses to the transforming power of Jesus Christ were trained to reach the world with the gospel. We had so great an opportunity. . . . and we lost it, because we got our eyes on the box rather than keeping our attention on Jesus.*

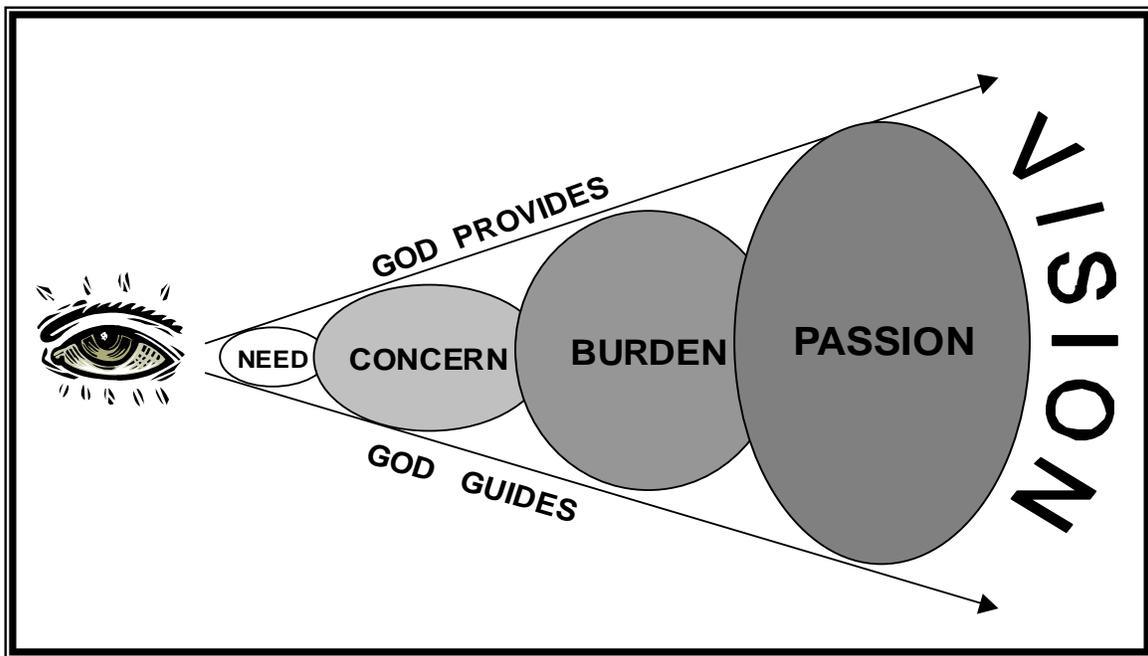
*My dream was that Heritage USA might be a modern-day City of Refuge, a place where hurting people could find the help and healing they needed, a place of refreshment and encouragement. My ideas concerning a Christian community were flawed. . . .<sup>135</sup>*

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<sup>134</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), 27-28.

<sup>135</sup> Jim Bakker, *I Was Wrong: The Untold Story of the Shocking Journey from Ptl Power to Prison and Beyond* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 471-472.

True vision cannot be understood easily or quickly—it may take years to discover. It is more something received as a calling from God than created. A Biblical word for vision is faith—obedience to walk by faith not by sight. It starts with obedience to a need, faithfulness over the long-haul as that need develops into a concern, that concern becomes a burden, and through much prayer and seeking God that burden becomes a passion and vision (see *Figure 6*). The emphasis on passion describes the fact that many great leaders minister out of their passion without ever being able to see in advance or fully articulate all that God eventually does with them. It is also vital that church leaders hear a fresh word from God at every stage on the journey to fulfilling a vision and passion in ministry. The development of passion and vision also involves the leader in receiving the guidance of God in understanding the needs around him and the provision of God as resources (people, money, leadership, facilities, etc.) become available to meet that need. A track record of watching God guide and provide prepares one for the next stage of the journey. It has been said the need never constitutes the call. However, responding to a need from a sense of call will most likely develop into a concern, a burden a passion and develop into a fully articulated vision. It is only after the passion/vision is clear that programs can begin to be set in place.





## The Programs of God's Church (Statement of Programs)

The character of the church is shaped lastly by its programs. Where there is freedom to express the unique calling of the church in its vision and passion, there is even more freedom in the Programs—the priorities, strategies, methods, organization, and ministries. Having built on a thoroughly Biblical foundation, the seeker church now has the freedom to adapt and change the programs of the church in a multitude of ways to achieve the purposes for which it has been sent into the world—exaltation, edification, evangelism and extension. Holding tightly to the foundational issues and lightly to the programs permits unity and flexibility in ministry. The implementation of programs is where most disputes take place and about which the Bible has least to say. It is a sure sign that someone does not understand ministry when they want to hold more tightly to the program than to the foundations. And yet sadly, that is the level at which debate over seeker ministry often takes place. Should we have a seeker-sensitive, seeker-targeted or seeker-driven service? Should we do drama and if so what is allowable? How far can we go musically? Should we include worship and if so how much? This mistake—of holding too tightly to the programs—is made by those on both sides of the seeker church debate.

A church cannot be built on its programs. As has been said before the character of the church is shaped in particular by its main event. If that main event is a shallow seeker service propped up by weak foundations then the church will never be strong. Many of its leaders will suffer burnout and disillusionment as the inadequate foundations will not carry the weight and emphasis they place on the seeker service. However, seeker churches that have laid the proper foundation need not agonize over the challenges of David Wells and other critics of the movement who imply that seeker services are all about cosmetic change and tinkering with the programs:

*It is one of the remarkable features of contemporary church life that so many are attempting to heal the church by tinkering with its structures, its services, its public face. This is clear evidence that modernity has successfully palmed off one of its great deceits on us, convincing us that God himself is secondary to organization and image, that the church's health lies in its flow charts, its convenience, and its offerings rather than in its inner life, its spiritual authenticity, the toughness of its moral intentions, its understanding of what it means to have God's Word in this world. Those who do not see this are out of touch with the deep realities of life, mistaking changes on the surface for changes in the deep waters that flow beneath. An inspired group of marketers might find a way of reviving a flagging business by modifying its image and offerings, but the matters of the heart, the matters of God, are not susceptible to such cosmetic alteration. The world's business and God's business are two different things. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who want to squander the church's resources bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood that is spilling from its true wounds. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.<sup>136</sup>*

## The Need For God: A Case Study From Exodus 32-33

“The seeker church movement is trying to reach people without God.” That statement has a double meaning; the seeker church movement is at its best when it is trying to reach people who do not yet know God; it is doomed if it tries to do so without God and his Word as foundational to the strategy. Many might think that because seeker churches are growing, are fuelled by vision and led by leaders, are experiencing community and sacrificial commitment that it is wrong to ask hard questions or to question their effectiveness? However, effectiveness and all the outward signs of success are never the bottom line. A case in point is the incident in Exodus 32 where the Israelites made the golden calf:

*When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.”*

*<sup>2</sup>Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” <sup>3</sup>So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup>He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”*

*<sup>5</sup>When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.” <sup>6</sup>So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.*

*<sup>7</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. <sup>8</sup>They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”*

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<sup>136</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 30.

A superficial look at the scene would lead to the conclusion that all was well with the Israelites. They exemplified the characteristics of a prevailing church. They recognized the need for divine guidance. They recognized their mission was crossing the desert and were eager to get on with it. They willingly submitted as a team to their leader to accomplish the task. They willingly sacrificed their possessions for the sake of the common good. Aaron even recognized that “the Lord” should have a place in all of this (though not his rightful place) so they announced that they would hold a festival to him, as long as he did not mind being mistaken for a golden calf. Even greater commitment was shown as they rose early the next day, worshipped fervently and fellowshiped heartily. Short of the revelry, most of our churches would be thrilled if their congregations could attain even half this list of characteristics. However, God describes them as “corrupt” and “quick to turn away from what I commanded them.” God says their chief offence was that they attributed their success in getting to where they were to something other than him--something that had no part in their success. They were engaged in worship but it was false worship. False worship looks like the real thing--almost everything looks the same from the outside. The Bible says these lessons are as applicable in New Testament times and even today; “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. <sup>7</sup>Do not be idolaters, as some of them were . . .” (1 Cor. 10:6-7). David Wells describes idolatry this way: “Idolatry, ancient and modern alike, consists in trusting some substitute for God to serve some uniquely divine function.”<sup>137</sup> Idolatry is what I fall into when I look to something or someone else to do for me what only God can do.

The idolatry the Israelites committed was attributing to something or someone else the success God has given. They were honoring someone or something else for doing what only God could have done. Clearly, only God could have been responsible for getting the Israelites out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. A sure sign of idolatry is when I confidently assert “this is what brought me success” about something which God clearly has done. Unfortunately, this happens in church growth circles all the time. An eager pastor moves to a new area; an area exploding with growth and new housing surrounds the church. The church grows numerically and soon the answers as to why the church grew sound like it all came down to human ingenuity and ministry savvy. How very quick we are to say “This is what brought me success”. Usually, our idols (strategy, planning, human wisdom, and managerial tools) are about as incapable of having produced our success as these idols were of delivering Israel. Os Guinness asks, “Where are modern insights and powers *legitimate* and *fruitful*? . . . where are they *idolatrous*? (Not because the insights and tools are inherently evil, but because-through their very usefulness-they can be points of false reliance and even working substitutes for God.)”<sup>138</sup> God is slighted when we attribute the success he gave to our techniques. We forget that he had compassion on us in our troubles. We forget the nights in prayer, the mistakes we made, the pain and the tears, the regrets, the sin he forgave, the miraculous interventions, the divine appointments. Attributing success to something or someone other than God (when he really has been behind it) is idolatry and false worship and Exodus 32:31 says it is a great sin.

Our troubles do not stop there. Just as the Israelites attributed their success to the calf they also anticipated success as they let the calf lead them through the desert. “They gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us’” (Exodus 32:1). The idolatry the Israelites committed was anticipating from something or someone else success only God can give. Too many leaders today are buying into the idea that if they can just latch onto whatever the right strategy they will have success. They faithfully attend conferences and seminars, take notes on the answers, and re-engineer the church to live up to their new expectations. They anticipate success will come from vision - so think big! Or perhaps it is from leadership--so refine your leadership gifts. Alternatively, perhaps if the pastor was cast more in the role of C.E.O. the church would be better run--so let's change the organizational chart. Maybe it is small groups--so let's build a cell-group church. Maybe the answer is a seeker service--so let's import drama and a band. All of these things are important in a church. But they are lesser priorities, they are all second things. Today, the church is preoccupied with the priority of second things. Too many books and conferences unintentionally send the message “if you trust in this plan it will work.” The churches they describe never succeeded by trusting in any plan but using a plan and trusting in God. Scripture is replete with warnings not to trust in the tools that Our World might say will get the job done (i.e. an army, strength, horses, for a king, a warrior, and a rider). Instead we are to put our trust in something which will get the job done in his World--fear and love of him. Indeed, putting our trust in him may not even get the same results but they will be the results that matter--the ones he wants (Psalm 33:16-18).

Trusting someone or something else to meet needs only God can also leads me away from worship of the Living God. Worship is what I give to anything that is at the center of our life. Man was created to have God at center but because of the Fall will now turn almost anywhere other than to God for comfort. Augustine said it well, “Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in thee, O God.” David Wells puts it this way, “. . . since we were made to relate to God, but do not want

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<sup>137</sup> Wells, *Wasteland*, 52.

<sup>138</sup> Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 32.

to face him, we forever inflate things in this world to religious proportions to fill the vacuum left by God's exclusion."<sup>139</sup>  
John Stott defines idolatry in his commentary on Acts,

*All idolatry, whether ancient or modern, primitive or sophisticated, is inexcusable, whether the images are metal or mental, material objects of worship or unworthy concepts in the mind. For idolatry is the attempt either to localize God, confining him within limits which we impose, whereas he is the Creator of the universe; or to domesticate God, making him dependent on us, taming and taping him, whereas he is the Sustainer of human life; or to alienate God, blaming him for his distance and his silence, whereas he is the Ruler of nations, and not far from any of us; or to dethrone God, demoting him to some image of our own contrivance or craft, whereas he is our Father from whom we derive our being. In brief, all idolatry tries to minimize the gulf between the Creator and his creatures, in order to bring him under our control. More than that, it actually reverses the respective positions of God and us, so that, instead of our humbly acknowledging that God has created and rules us, we presume to imagine that we can create and rule God. There is no logic in idolatry; it is a perverse, topsy-turvy expression of our human rebellion against God. . . .<sup>140</sup>*

Shortly after the incident with the golden calf, Moses cried out to God in a prayer with which we can all identify. We can understand his prayer better if we put ourselves in Moses sandals. This was not a refined King James English prayer, delivered Charlton Heston style, confidently awaiting divine inspiration but ready to press on without it. It was a gut-wrenching, soul-sobbing, heart-wrenching cry to Almighty God to reveal himself. Exodus 33:12-14 Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.'"<sup>13</sup>If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people."<sup>14</sup>The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Specifically, he said let me know who I can depend on as I lead these people. And he asked, "Teach me your ways so I may know you." We can be sure Moses could relate to the pressures of the modern church leader. Who has not lain on the ground crying out to God to lead and guide. Moses did and he asked God two things "Help me" and "Teach me." If we are going to learn his ways, God will have to teach us. Interestingly, God's response was not a leadership technique nor was it a principle for leadership. It was not even a proper answer--or so it would seem. And yet it answered everything; "The LORD replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'" This was God's response to Moses concerns about leadership; it is not someone else we need, it is God. Success is not a how (pragmatics) or a how much (money, power), it is a who. The answer to the person who says to God, "Teach me your ways" is "I will be with you."

## Conclusion

Much of the conflict between Biblical purity and cultural relevance takes place at the level of seeker services (programs). But churches built on the needs of the seeker or believer are neither culturally relevant nor Biblically pure—these needs are inadequate foundations. Other inadequate concepts as primary foundations are the programs of the church (how contemporary or culturally relevant they can be), the leaders of the church (how visionary they are), and the spiritual gifts of the people. Although all of these ideas have their place, there are better foundations. A more Biblical foundation than the needs of the seeker or believer, the programs, or the giftedness or vision of the leader is the Person of God—the fulfillment of his Purposes as we enjoy his Presence. The leader needs to hear from God and develop the clear and unambiguous conviction that his ministry is a divine commission. The church's leadership need to build the church on the Person of God and the Word of God rather than the fashions and fads of men. They need to value the priesthood of the believer, the character and calling of the people, and their spiritual unity before their organizational unity. Prescriptions for the ailments of the church are suspect that do not bring hope that the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the people of God are the resources to accomplish the task.

Success, then, is *enjoying the presence of God as we fulfill his purposes*. Effective ministry flows from leaders who hold tightly to the person of God in worship and prayer, who believe that he speaks to them, sends them, and stays with them as they accomplish his eternal purposes. Effective ministry is done by those who are guided by the principles of God's Word, who understand the goal of building up the people of God, who have developed a Biblical passion and vision, and implemented effective programs.

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<sup>139</sup> Guinness and Seel, *No God But God*, 32.

<sup>140</sup> John Stott, *The Spirit The Church, And The World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 287.

## CHAPTER 8

### REVIEW AND REFLECTIONS

#### **Introduction**

The seeker church movement can benefit from the concerns and cautions raised by the critics of seeker church ministry. Each issue raised in this thesis has application to some seeker churches and some of the critiques to all seeker churches. It will take wisdom and discernment on the part of seeker church leaders to know which changes would strengthen their ministry. All seeker churches need to build upon Biblical foundations while retaining their enthusiasm for culturally relevant ministry.

#### **Closing Observations About The Critics And Criticisms**

It becomes evident when reading the critiques of the movement that the critics and the criticisms fall into several different categories and it is necessary to separate the wheat from the chaff. Some cautions and criticisms do come from concerned advocates who are actively engaged in effective evangelistic and Biblical ministry. However, a few critics of the seeker church cast aspersions on the motives and methods of seeker church leaders with cheap shots that barely deserve a response—other people’s motives are always difficult to discern. Frequent criticisms include notions that the demands of the gospel are *necessarily* watered down and that the use of drama, media, and a service for seekers are *necessarily* a compromise. Some critics acknowledge that balance is possible but write as if error is inherent to the whole approach and doctrinal compromise is the only possible outcome.

Some criticisms come from those who do not know enough about the churches they are criticizing—this is especially true about criticisms of Willow Creek and Saddleback. It seems that many critics are building their case on an inaccurately reported version of a seeker service; it is easy to criticize poor clones of great seeker churches. As Bill Hybels says: “First of all, I think there are many people who have observed our methods and have taken them to an unhealthy extreme. That’s why, when I’m asked how I feel about the criticisms against the seeker-sensitive movement, I say I appreciate them because they’re good for the church. The second reason I think some of those books come about is my hunch that they are written by men and women who have not spent a lot of time doing evangelism themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

Some criticisms and concerns seem to arise when the ministries of the traditional church begin to change, when cultural relevance seems to affect a favored style or custom. The concerns often intensify when something familiar and precious is being replaced. However, too many of the books I read betray an underlying personal preference for traditional expressions of worship and a consequent rejection of contemporary styles cloaked in expressions of concern about Biblical compromise. Several authors seemed to be saying, “If the church could just continue doing everything the way it was done 30 years ago, God would bless it and we would reach people.” While we ought to sympathize with such expressions of preference for tradition over cultural relevance, they must not be confused with issues of Biblical compromise.

Many of those writing and speaking against the movement appear to be “unloving critics rather than uncritical lovers” of the church.<sup>2</sup> While I could not agree with everything in his book, Richard Mouw is right in calling for a “hermeneutic of charity” instead of a “hermeneutic of suspicion” toward new movements of popular evangelicalism:

*Why are so many theologians inclined simply to denounce these phenomena rather than to work to establish them on more solid theological foundations? Some of these scholars, I suspect, simply do not like popular evangelicalism very much. Others are convinced that the basic currents of popular religion are so misguided that it is useless to try to look for positive signs. For whatever reason, many Christian thinkers feel no obligation to find points of contact between their own scholarly formulations and the expressed desires and interests of ordinary Christians. They see the yearnings and explorations at work in popular religion primarily as phenomena that need to be corrected, rather than as posing an agenda for constructive theological consideration. They approach popular religion with a hermeneutic of suspicion instead of a hermeneutic of charity.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Hybels, “Selling Out the House of God?” 20-25.

<sup>2</sup> A phrase used by Dr. Leighton Ford during the oral defense of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful*, 17-18.

A. B. Bruce drew attention to the same issue many years ago in his book, *The Training Of The Twelve*, in commenting upon Jesus teaching on old wine in new wineskins:

*The old cloth and old bottles in these metaphors represent old ascetic fashions in religion; the new cloth and the new wine represent the new joyful life in Christ, not possessed by those who tenaciously adhered to the old fashions. The parables were applied primarily to Christ's own age, but they admit of application to all transition epochs; indeed, they find new illustration in almost every generation . . .*

*Without going the length of denunciation or direct attempt at suppression, those who stand by the old often oppose the new by the milder method of disparagement. They eulogize the venerable past, and contrast it with the present, to the disadvantage of the latter. "The old wine is vastly superior to the new: how mellow, mild, fragrant, wholesome, the one! How harsh and fiery the other!" Those who say so are not the worst of men: they are often the best, the men of taste and feeling, the gentle, the reverent, and the good, who are themselves excellent samples of the old vintage. Their opposition forms by far the most formidable obstacle to the public recognition and toleration of what is new in religious life; for it naturally creates a strong prejudice against any cause when the saintly disapprove of it.*

*Observe, then, how Christ answers the honest admirers of the old wine. He concedes the point: He admits that their preference is natural. Luke represents Him as saying, in the conclusion of His reply to the disciples of the Baptist: "No man also, having drunk old wine, desireth the new; for he saith, The old is good." (Luke 5:39) This striking sentiment exhibits rare candor in stating the case of opponents, and not less rare modesty and tact in stating the case of friends. It is as if Jesus had said: "I do not wonder that you love the old wine of Jewish piety, fruit of a very ancient vintage; or even that you dote upon the very bottles which contain it, covered over with the dust and cobwebs of ages. But what then? Do men object to the existence of new wine, or refuse to have it in their possession, because the old is superior in flavor? No: they drink the old, but they carefully preserve the new, knowing that the old will get exhausted, and that the new, however harsh, will mend with age, and may ultimately be superior even in flavor to that which is in present use. Even so should you behave towards the new wine of my kingdom. You may not straightway desire it, because it is strange and novel; but surely you might deal more wisely with it than merely to spurn it, or spill and destroy it!"<sup>4</sup>*

### **Closing Observations For The Seeker Church Movement**

I continue to be impressed by the supernatural work of God through seeker churches, particularly Willow Creek Community Church. Whatever the shortcomings of the seeker church model or the seeker church movement, there is an evident anointing of God on Bill Hybels. What impressed me as an attender in the 1980's continues to inspire me—seeing a group of people sold out to what God can do. The same could be said of Saddleback Valley Community Church. The overwhelming impression of many when they visit or attend conferences at Willow Creek or Saddleback Valley is that these churches are a work of God. The seeker church movement continues to be a more evangelistically effective expression of the church than any other model around today.<sup>5</sup> Attempts to explain and even repeat those works of God that do not recognize this divine dimension will miss the mark.

Implications for the seeker church movement are shared throughout the thesis but a major one would be that the seeker church movement needs to ensure it is theologically driven rather than just ministry driven. William Crabb and Jeff Jernigan remind us that, "A ministry philosophy consists of conceptual and practical elements: what we say and what we do. Congruence between what we say and do builds trust, while large differences build cynicism."<sup>6</sup> If "what we say" represents our theology and "what we do" represents our ministry practice, then what some seeker churches do in ministry practice is incongruent with what they believe in their theology. They need to return to the first things of God and his Word as the true foundation for ministry.

Within hours of finishing this thesis I met with the seeker church pastors in the Atlanta area mentioned above for one of our regular prayer and encouragement lunches. We had the privilege of hearing from Gilbert Bilezikian—a college professor, the visionary behind Willow Creek Community Church, one of its elders and a teacher, mentor, and friend to Bill Hybels.<sup>7</sup> Bilezikian is an ardent advocate of seeker church ministry and yet his challenge that day was to avoid the "drums and drama" trap of thinking great churches were built on their programs! He reminded us great churches were built on the doctrine of God and grew from an understanding of his nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, he suggested that the church grows more from the nature of God (who God is) than the will of God (something God decided). His plea was that seeker churches develop their doctrine of the church and let theological considerations drive the movement. He reminded us of Jesus teaching in John 17:21-23 and said, "There is an impartation to community of something of the nature

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<sup>4</sup> A. B. Bruce, *The Training Of The Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1971), 76-78. See Matt. 9:14-17; Mark 2:16-22; Luke 5:33-39.

<sup>5</sup> See the WCA study on seeker churches and their impact in "Impact Of A Movement," *WCA News*, Vol. 5 No. 6 (November/December 1997), 1-9.

<sup>6</sup> Crabb and Jernigan, *The Church in Ruins*, 99.

<sup>7</sup> The description of how the vision for Willow Creek Community Church took shape during Bill Hybels early encounters with Dr. Bilezikian, affectionately known as "Dr. B.," is recorded in *Rediscovering Church*, 46-50.

of God that makes it sacred.” He also suggested that Willow Creek Church Leadership Conferences would serve the seeker church movement better by preceding the conference with a half day seminar on the doctrine of God and the church.<sup>8</sup>

## Peer Review And Responses

A number of leaders and pastors read the thesis and gave responses as it was taking shape. Firstly, was a group of about a dozen pastors in the Atlanta area who are doing seeker church ministry, including the pastors of two churches that Cumberland Community Church helped start. Some of these pastors are planting new churches, some have been pastoring seeker churches for several years, and some are transitioning traditional churches. This group is part of a larger group that meets together for prayer and mutual encouragement about every six weeks in the Atlanta area. They gave constructive feedback that basically affirmed the tensions expressed in the thesis. Several said they found the opportunity to read a systematic treatment of the issue of cultural relevance and Biblical purity very enlightening and that it confirmed many of their own observations. Most agreed that the concerns and criticisms could be applied to specific local churches but were not inherent in the model and were less true of the flagship churches. Almost all expressed agreement with some specific concerns, for example, the concern that the seeker church strategy of a separate service for believers did not work because believers do not come to the believers service. These pastors have been dealing with this frustration by adapting their ministries to these realities and adding more biblical teaching and worship to the seeker service. One pastor expressed it this way: “If an inherent problem with the model is the fact (which you established) that a very high percentage of Christians will not return to a second service, are we left with the position that it is our responsibility as shepherds of God’s flock to offer a single Sunday morning experience that meets the minimum requirements of both the seekers we desire to reach and the believers we desire to build? . . . In the area of teaching, I think the challenge is significant but not insurmountable . . .”<sup>9</sup>

Another group who read the thesis were several of the elders and staff of Cumberland Community Church. All of them affirmed the expressions of the tension between cultural relevance and Biblical purity and the adaptations of the seeker church model we have already made. These issues have been discussed many times and the church has made adaptations and refinements accordingly.

Yet another group was various pastors and church leaders from around the country who are familiar with the seeker church movement. This group of about a dozen included some who are in parachurch ministries, some who are pastoring seeker churches, some who are prominent in the seeker church movement, and some who are in leadership at Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association. The feedback from this group was similar to the feedback from the Atlanta pastors group. However, some felt the thesis was too hard on the seeker church and expressed concern that some of the observations and conclusions could be used to do harm to the movement.

Some readers, knowing of the ministry of Cumberland Community Church, expressed disappointment that I had not said more in favor of seeker churches. My goal in writing the thesis and a balanced presentation of the benefits of seeker church ministry are not one and the same. I continue to be a cautious advocate of seeker church ministry and believe it is the way many churches will have to change to reach an increasingly secular culture. I am more committed to this expression of the local church and to pastoring this type of church than I have ever been. That may become the subject of another book. For instance, I have argued strongly in favor of cultural relevance in Chapters 1 and 2; that tone would be given equal time with the criticisms of the seeker church throughout if the thesis was a comparison of the cultural relevance and Biblical purity of seeker churches and traditional churches. However, the purpose of this thesis was “to describe the tension between cultural relevance and Biblical purity, to identify and evaluate the concerns being raised about the seeker church movement, and to offer suggestions as to how seeker church leaders can maintain a balance between the need for cultural relevance and biblical purity.” My primary method was research analysis—reading and interacting with what others have written. Those who have written most about the tension (albeit with overkill) are the critics; advocates tend not to address it since they are so committed to cultural relevance. As an advocate of seeker churches I so much want them to prevail that I want to glean anything I can from the critics—particularly to maintain the Biblical purity of the church.

One common response from most of the groups reading the thesis was to observe that while the concerns and criticisms about the seeker church may be right the traditional church does not have a better model to offer. That is why these pastors are leading seeker churches and are part of the seeker church movement. I agree that the traditional church is no shining example of a prevailing church. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to miss opportunities to improve the Biblical purity of seeker churches by simply being content to compare them favorably to traditional churches.

Some readers also expressed disappointment that the critics appear to be so judgmental toward churches trying hard to reach people for Christ. The critics claim the seeker church has compromised its Biblical purity for the sake of cultural relevance; some wonder if the critics have compromised their Biblical purity for the sake of defending the traditional

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Bilezikian’s latest book expounds on these issues—*Community 101: Reclaiming The Church As Community Of Oneness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> E-mail to the author dated Feb. 24, 1999 from Rev. Kevin Cash, Northwest Community Church, Kennesaw, GA.

church. One pastor expressed the concern of many in asking if the critics held onto the traditional church and let that one model become an idol itself.

## Reflections On The Process And Implications For Ministry

The process of researching and writing this thesis has been extremely beneficial. The observations made in the first five years of seeker church ministry at Cumberland Community Church resulted in adapting the philosophy of ministry in light of the potential compromises of Biblical purity. The Foundations For Ministry concept (*Figure 5*) grew out of a desire to be culturally relevant and Biblically pure and a desire to express the true foundations of the church for the benefit of those in ministry at Cumberland Community Church and elsewhere. The philosophy of ministry of Cumberland Community Church as a culturally relevant, Biblically pure seeker church has helped its ministry withstand the challenges of the critics.

The opportunity to express these thoughts in a coherent way has also brought more reflection and refinement. For instance, before the writing of this thesis, the Statement of Vision/Passion in the Foundations For Ministry diagram was placed third in order of priority--before the Statement of Practice describing fully devoted followers of Christ; now, their positions have been reversed.<sup>10</sup> There are two main reasons for this change: firstly, the vision and passion of a church may change and is a more localized and temporal expression of ministry than the development of the people of God. Secondly, and more importantly, the empowered people of God are more foundational to a Biblically pure church than visionary leaders. The doctrine of the church and the priesthood of the believer are more important foundations than what a single leader or group of leaders thinks the church ought to accomplish. While upholding vision and passion are the responsibility of leaders, they are part of the Body of Christ and the expression of that leadership role, however significant, ought not to come before the expression of all the gifts and roles within the body.

I had originally intended to produce a study guide composed of questions to help in determining the Biblical purity of a seeker church. As the writing of the thesis progressed, it became evident that the best way to organize the material was to put section headings within the chapters in the form of questions. These questions, listed in the table of contents, can be used by the reader to turn to relevant sections for help in reflecting on the Biblical purity of the church.

Further studies and research that might help clarify the issues in this thesis would be to do a survey of seeker churches to establish the extent to which the critiques apply. It would also be helpful to examine the "success rate" of start-up seeker churches compared with the "success rate" of different styles of start-up churches. That is, how many seeker churches are effectively reaching people for Christ and growing deeper in community and service. A study on the failure rate of new seeker churches and the reasons for the failures would also provide helpful insights. In the Introduction it was stated that the purpose of this thesis is not to present a balanced evaluation of seeker church ministry compared with, say, traditional approaches; nor to present as strong an apologetic as can possibly be made for seeker church ministry. Both of those subjects would also be appropriate for future study.

## Conclusion

The tension between cultural relevance and Biblical purity is evident in the criticism heaped on seeker churches for using new methods to reach the unchurched. The critics say seeker churches define the methods and message of the church by the desires of the world rather than the desires of God. The advocates say traditional churches use methods that obscure the message of the church because they are not listening to the desires of God for the church. The seeker church movement is at its best when it not only asks, "What kind of church pleases people?" but also "What kind of church pleases God?" When we ask the latter question first we find that God wants us to ask the first question too. It is "for the sake of the gospel" that seeker churches are using new ministry methods.

This thesis has argued that it is possible for seeker churches to maintain Biblical purity while being culturally relevant and still impact the unchurched to a greater extent than in many traditional churches. Seeker church ministry does not necessitate Biblical compromise any more than a traditional style of ministry guarantees biblical purity. The idea that a seeker-oriented church must necessarily lose the essential Biblical qualities of a great church or compromise the gospel is simply a myth. While there may be heightened tension between Biblical purity and cultural relevance in the seeker church, there need be no compromise. However, seeker church leaders do need to weigh the validity of the concerns and criticisms and deal thoroughly with the unintended consequences of adopting a seeker-focused approach to ministry, particularly where they might accept uncritically the values of the larger movement.

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, while attending the meeting mentioned above at the offices of Cumberland Community Church on March 18, 1999, said, "Congregationally based evangelism is the strength of the seeker church program."

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Willow Creek Community Church: Community Survey**

In Northwest Suburban Chicago, in 1975, a handful of young Christian leaders caught the vision of reaching the adults and families in their community who did not know Christ, but for whom they knew God cared very much. After having pioneered Son City, a youth ministry which grew from 25 students to 1,200 in just three years, these leaders and students became burdened for the parents and families and other adults in their lives who did not know the Lord. The vision became rooted, but a very key question emerged in the process: “God loves these people, and they need to know about Him, but they won’t come to church . . . WHY NOT?” To learn the answer to that important question, they brought it straight to the source . . . they asked the people themselves.

“Do you actively attend a local church?” was the question they asked. If the people answered yes, they thanked them for their time and left. However, if the people answered no, they asked them why . . . and then charted the responses. Later, when all the answers were tabulated, it was found that the number one reason people in this community did not attend church was because the church was *always asking for money*.

The next reasons were:

*I am unable to relate to the music.*

*I am unable to relate to the message.*

*The church does not meet my needs.*

*The services are predictable and boring.*

*The church makes me feel guilty.*

For those people who gave reasons for not attending church, they were asked a follow-up question: “If these factors were eliminated, would you then go to church?” If they answered yes, they were told that a church called Willow Creek Community Church was starting soon, and that it was going to be different in these very areas. Then they were invited to come and were given some further information about when and where the church would be located.

(It should be noted and cautioned that the responses garnered by the Willow Creek survey takers were representative of the type of people who live in the northwestern suburban area of Chicago. These responses may or may not be exactly the same as the responses one might gather from a different geographic location.)

Through the tool of this survey, prayer, adherence to the Word of God, the hard work and dedication of the people involved, and most importantly, through the faithfulness and grace of God . . . the vision became a reality.

Today, Willow Creek Community Church continues to effectively share Christ with the surrounding communities through relevant and exciting, yet challenging, services. With the wisdom and discernment of God’s Word, it is sensitively ministering to their very real needs: relational, financial, career, emotional, physical and spiritual.

## Appendix B: Willow Creek's 7-Step Strategy

## Appendix C: Defining a Movement: Ten Distinctive Values

(Unpublished Paper of The Willow Creek Association)

*A summarized form of the paper listing the ten values is as follows:*

- 1. We believe that anointed teaching is the catalyst for transformation in individuals' lives and in the church. (This includes the concept of teaching for life change--Romans 12:7, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, James 1:23-25).*
- 2. We believe that lost people matter to God, and therefore, ought to matter to the church. (This includes the concepts of relational evangelism and evangelism as a process--Luke 5:30-32, Luke 15, Matthew 18:14).*
- 3. We believe that the church should be culturally relevant while remaining doctrinally pure. (This includes the concept of sensitively relating to our culture through our facility, printed materials, and use of the arts--1 Corinthians 9:19-23).*
- 4. We believe that Christ-followers should manifest authenticity and yearn for continuous growth. (This includes the concepts of personal authenticity, character, and wholeness--Ephesians 4:25-26, 32, Hebrews 12:1, Philippians 1:6).*
- 5. We believe that a church should operate as a unified community of servants with men and women stewarding their spiritual gifts. (This includes the concepts of unity, servanthood, spiritual gifts, and ministry callings--1 Corinthians 12 and 14, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, Psalm 133:1).*
- 6. We believe that loving relationships should permeate every aspect of church life. (This includes the concepts of love-driven ministry, ministry accomplished in teams and relationship building--1 Corinthians 13, Nehemiah 3, Luke 10:1, John 13:34-35).*
- 7. We believe that life-change happens best in small groups. (This includes the concepts of discipleship, vulnerability, and accountability--Luke 6:12-13, Acts 2:44-47).*
- 8. We believe that excellence honors God and inspires people. (This includes the concepts of evaluation, critical review, intensity and excellence--Colossians 3:17, Malachi 1:6-14, Proverbs 27:17).*
- 9. We believe that churches should be led by men and women with leadership gifts. (This includes the concepts of empowerment, servant leadership, strategic focus, and intentionality--Nehemiah 1-2, Romans 12:8, Acts 6:2-5).*
- 10. We believe that the pursuit of full devotion to Christ and His cause is normal for every believer. (This includes the concepts of stewardship, servanthood, downward mobility, and the pursuit of kingdom goals--1 Kings 11:4, Philippians 2:1-11, 2 Corinthians 8:7).*

## Appendix D: W.C.A. Value #1: “We believe that anointed teaching is the catalyst for transformation in individuals’ lives and in the church.”

*“The word of God is living and active,” says Hebrews 4:12. “Sharper than any double-edged sword it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, connecting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

*According to Acts 2:42, the first believers devoted themselves “to the apostles’ teaching.” It is clear from all these passages that the Bible has the catalytic power to transform the lives of individual believers, and by extension, to transform the church.*

*When we speak of “anointed” biblical teaching, we refer to teaching that goes beyond information to transformation. It is teaching that is empowered and led by the Holy Spirit from preparation to presentation. It goes beyond simple biblical accuracy to a relevant application of truth—impacting those who listen and respond.*

*Peter’s Pentecost Day is a good example of transformational teaching. He spoke to a diverse, confused and skeptical crowd of “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” Acts 2 describes the scene: they thought this small band of Jerusalem Christians was drunk! Quoting passages from the Old Testament, Peter boldly proclaimed Christ and the reality of His resurrection. Look what happened in Acts 2:37: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”*

*Peter’s solidly biblical teaching went straight to the hearts of his listeners and evoked an earnest response.*

*To remain solidly biblical, teachers need to teach the whole counsel of God. When trying to reach seekers, the temptation is to create a steady diet of “felt-need” teaching. It might be easier to shy away from those passages that could possibly offend unbelievers or make them uncomfortable. But true biblical teaching requires teachers to be obedient to the Spirit’s leadings and promptings so that they will teach the whole counsel of God.*

*A teacher should also be alert to the danger of allowing the arts, versus the message, to become the primary focus of a seeker service or a believers’ service. The use of drama, music and other elements must always remain secondary and in a supportive role to the preaching of the Word of God. The arts should serve as guides that prepare the listeners for the message from God. The arts, when effectively integrated into a service and when done in a God-honoring way, will engage the heart, emotions and intellect of the seeker or worshipper.*

*The goal of our teaching is not only the transformation of individual lives, but also the transformation of the church. Anointed biblical teaching can move an entire body of believers toward becoming a biblically functioning community.*

*Anointed biblical teaching can build unity among the congregation and provide a sense of God’s presence and guidance as the church gathers together under the teaching of His Word. It can impact structure, polity, methodology, vision, values and strategy. Anointed biblical teaching has the power to bring about change, transforming a local body of believers into a dynamic community where pursuing lost people is a priority, spiritual gifts are actively employed and God’s grace is celebrated. When it comes to communicating the gospel, “remaining doctrinally pure” means that a church does not ignore, massage, manipulate or otherwise distort the fundamental truths revealed in the Bible, but instead displays an unflinching adherence to and unapologetic proclamation of biblical truth. In 2 Timothy 4:2-4, Paul charged Timothy to resolutely preach the Word, because “the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead . . . they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (v.3). Paul knew that the message of the cross would be perceived as foolish or offensive by many, and Jesus made it clear that what He proclaimed would cause division (1 Cor. 1:22-25; Gal. 5:11; Man. 10:34-36). The temptation to coddle a resistant society must be carefully monitored, and those in church leadership must refuse to back away from proclaiming the truth.*

## Appendix E: W.C.A. Value #3: “We Believe that the Church Should be Culturally Relevant While Remaining Doctrinally Pure”

*When it comes to communicating the gospel, “remaining doctrinally pure” means that a church does not ignore, massage, manipulate or otherwise distort the fundamental truths revealed in the Bible, but instead displays an unflinching adherence to and unapologetic proclamation of biblical truth. In 2 Timothy 4:2-4, Paul charged Timothy to resolutely preach the Word, because “the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead . . . they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (v.3). Paul knew that the message of the cross would be perceived as foolish or offensive by many, and Jesus made it clear that what He proclaimed would cause division (1 Cor. 1:22-25; Gal. 5:11; Matt. 10:34-36). The temptation to coddle a resistant society must be carefully monitored, and those in church leadership must refuse to back away from proclaiming the truth.*

*To be “culturally relevant” means to package and present that truth in the language of contemporary society. If biblical doctrine were a picture, traditional and contemporary formats would be among the choices of “frames” in which to display the truth. For churches unconcerned about reaching unchurched people, displaying truth in a contemporary frame is of little consequence. But for churches trying to reach irreligious people, the objective is to anticipate and minimize objections to attending a service, without compromising the gospel message. Music, facilities and use of the arts should all reflect the culture within which we live. For example, when leaders of Willow Creek designed their buildings and campus, they didn’t visit other churches for inspiration; they visited the sites frequented by those they hoped to reach, like corporate offices, malls and civic centers.*

*Jesus was a master of presenting truth in the language of His day. When trying to describe the Kingdom of God, Jesus suggested a mustard seed, which in that day was known as the smallest of seeds, yet grew to be the largest of garden plants. He used current events to make his points, once referring to 18 people killed by a collapsed tower when asked about degrees of sinfulness (Luke 13:4). He used fig trees, coins, sheep and situational parables (like the persistent widow, prodigal son and shrewd manager) to communicate truth to his audience in language with which they were familiar.*

*Seeker-targeted programming strategies are simply an application of Jesus’ methods to the church of our generation. Where He told stories, we elaborate with drama. Where He illustrated truth with easily recognized objects and the common knowledge of His day, so we capitalize on current events and concerns. Where He communicated to large crowds from a boat across the water or from a mountainside across a plateau, so we employ current technology to enhance our communication of the Gospel.*

*In attempting to lead seekers to faith, the Apostle Paul also took his cultural cues from those he was trying to reach. In order to “win as many as possible” to Christ, Paul became like a Jew to win the Jews; like one under the law to win those under the law; like one not having the law to win those not having the law; and like the weak to win the weak. Paul freely admitted that he had “become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:19-23). It is striking that he uses the phrase “by all possible means.” For Paul, everything was negotiable except the message of the cross.*

*The most difficult question that each church must wrestle with before God is, “When does cultural relevancy undermine the biblically functioning community?” In other words, at what point is the adoption of a contemporary style pushed too far, compromising the life of the church and the honor of God? This is a challenge that must be confronted with every message preached, with every song sung, with every event programmed. Pastors who preach sanitized talk-show fodder, vocalists who play “rock star,” or churches that stage purely sensational events with no substance or purpose other than to attract attention, produce a hollow imitation of the Church that caters to the applause of men.*

*But even with the risks associated with contemporary ministry formats, there is nothing to be gained by “playing it safe” and backdating ministry style by two hundred years or more. If a church insists on perpetuating the standard fare in ministry for the sake of tradition or “spiritual correctness,” ministry format will continue to be one more obstacle unbelievers must negotiate on the path to faith. Churches that are serious about reaching unchurched people can begin to remove the barriers that prevent unbelievers from hearing the life-changing message of Christ by adopting ministry formats that reflect contemporary culture.*

## Appendix F: Willow Creek Evangelism Ministry Transferable Principles

(Unpublished Paper of Willow Creek Community Church)

- 1. The message of Christ should flow out of a life fully given to Christ. Spiritual seekers are drawn to spiritual authenticity.*
- 2. Every believer in the church needs to be involved in personal as well as church-wide efforts to reach people for Christ. In order to facilitate this, training programs must be designed for and promoted to the whole church body, not just those with gifts of evangelism. Further, those with an evangelism gift need to be identified and given opportunities to develop and use that gift.*
- 3. The most effective way to reach people is through a relationship. Men and women are much more receptive to ideas from friends than from strangers.*
- 4. Intentional building of relationships for the purpose of presenting the message of Christ to nonbelievers needs to be modeled from the top. This includes the senior pastor, church staff, elders, lay leaders, etc.*
- 5. Reaching lost people must be a pervasive goal of the whole church, not relegated to one ministry. If there is an evangelism department, its purpose and activities need to be well integrated with the rest of the church.*
- 6. The evangelism approach used by individuals in the church must flow out of their own personality rather than mimicking someone else. Differing styles of evangelism are not only acceptable, they are essential.*
- 7. Communication of the gospel message, both through church programs and individuals, must be through terminology that is up-to-date and illustrations that are relevant to the person being addressed. In order for this to happen, conscious efforts must be made—especially by older Christians—to rethink the words and phrases used and to translate ideas into marketplace language.*
- 8. Though conversion to Christ comes at a point in time, people come to that point through a process. We need to respect and foster that process instead of trying to shortcut it, which tends to slow it or stop it altogether.*
- 9. During that process, spiritual seekers will have many questions and objections to what the Bible teaches. These become roadblocks that prevent them from seriously considering the gospel. We need to be receptive to those questions, treat them with respect and do our best to present adequate reasons and answers (I Peter 3:15).*
- 10. Non-Christians almost universally have misconceptions about the nature and character of God, and these prevent their being drawn to Him. We need to creatively re-teach them and present the truth about who God is and what He is really like.*
- 11. The step of putting one's trust in Christ is more a beginning than an end. It is a birth that marks the start of a growth process toward the goal of Christian maturity (Col. 1:28).*
- 12. We are commissioned by God to do our very best in strategizing to effectively reach lost people for Him. But throughout all our efforts we must remember our reliance on Him. We need to ask constantly for His wisdom and direction, as well as the Holy Spirit's activity of drawing and convincing people to follow Him.*

Appendix G: 1995 Willow Creek Association Member Survey

Appendix H: Discussions about New Community: August 9, 1996

## Appendix I: What The Bible Teaches About 'Seekers'

### *God Is The Seeker, He Is Seeking Worshippers, And He Reveals Himself To Whom He Chooses*

Matthew 18:12 "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?"

Luke 15:4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"

Luke 15:8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?"

Luke 15:20 "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

Luke 19:10 "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

John 4:23-24 "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. (24) God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

John 6:70 Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!"

John 15:16 "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."

John 6:37-40 "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. <sup>38</sup>For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup>And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. <sup>40</sup>For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 6:44-45 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. <sup>45</sup>It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me."

John 6:65 He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."

### *No One Truly Seeks God And People Seek God For The Wrong Reasons . . .*

Romans 3:10-12 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; (11) there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. (12) All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

John 6:26-29 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. (27) Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." (28) Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" (29) Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

### *. . . Yet God Designed, Honors And Encourages The Seeking Process*

Jeremiah 29:11-14 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. <sup>12</sup>Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup>You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup>I will be found by you . . ."

Isaiah 55:6-7 Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. <sup>7</sup>Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. Romans 10:20 And Isaiah boldly says, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me."

Acts 13:48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Deut. 4:29 But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Psalms 9:10 Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.

Psalms 14:2 The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.

Acts 2:21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Acts 15:16-18 “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup>that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’ <sup>18</sup>that have been known for ages.

Acts 17:26-28 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup>God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup>For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

Matthew 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 7:7-8 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Luke 12:31 “But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

Romans 2:5-11 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. <sup>6</sup>God “will give to each person according to what he has done.” <sup>7</sup>To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. <sup>8</sup>But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. <sup>9</sup>There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; <sup>10</sup>but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. <sup>11</sup>For God does not show favoritism.

Romans 10:13 . . . for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

James 4:8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Rev. 3:20 “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Rev. 21:6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.”

Rev. 22:17 The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

### ***Some But Not All Unbelievers Are Seekers . . .***

Psalms 53:1-3 The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, and their ways are vile; there is no one who does good. <sup>2</sup>God looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.

Psalms 78:32-33 In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe. <sup>33</sup>So he ended their days in futility and their years in terror.

Psalms 119:115 Away from me, you evildoers, that I may keep the commands of my God!

Luke 23:8-9 When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. <sup>9</sup>He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.

Philip. 3:18-19 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

Acts 2:5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

Acts 10:22 The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."

Acts 13:26 "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent."

Acts 13:50 But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.

Acts 17:4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

Acts 17:17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

Acts 8:27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship . . .

Acts 10:2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

Acts 13:16 Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!

Acts 16:13-14 On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Acts 17:23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

Acts 18:7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God.

### *. . . But All Seekers Are Unbelievers*

Matthew 9:36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew 25:31-34 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. [32] All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. [33] He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. [34] "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

Mark 16:16 "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Luke 8:12 "Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

Luke 12:46 "The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers."

John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 4:48 "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."

John 5:37-40 "And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, [38] nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. [39] You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, [40] yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

John 6:30 So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"

John 6:64 “Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him.

John 8:24 “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.”

John 8:44-45 “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. [45] Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!”

John 10:25-28 Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, [26] but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. [27] My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. [28] I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”

John 12:47-50 “As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. [48] There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. [49] For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. [50] I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

John 14:17 “. . . the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

John 15:18 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”

John 16:8 “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment . . .”

John 17:25 “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me.”

Acts 13:48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Romans 1:18-21 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, [19] since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. [20] For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Romans 5:6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 6:17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.

Romans 6:19-20 I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. 20 When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.

1 Cor. 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Cor. 1:23 . . . but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles . . .

1 Cor. 1:26-31 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. (27) But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (28) He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, (29) so that no one may boast before him. (30) It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. (31) Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

1 Cor. 2:14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Cor. 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders (10) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (11) And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Cor. 6:20 . . . you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

1 Cor. 7:23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.

1 Cor. 12:2 You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols.

2 Cor. 4:3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

Galatians 4:8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

Ephes. 2:1-3 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,<sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

<sup>3</sup>All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Ephes. 2:11-12 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)--<sup>12</sup>remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

Ephes. 4:22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;

Ephes. 5:6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Ephes. 5:8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light

Philip. 3:18-19 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup>Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

Col. 1:21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

Col. 2:13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature,

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,

Col. 3:5-8 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. [6] Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. [7] You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. [8] But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

1 Tim. 5:8 If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

2 Tim. 3:1-5 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. [2] People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, [3] without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, [4] treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God--[5] having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

Titus 1:15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.

Titus 3:3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

1 Peter 1:18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,

1 Peter 2:10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:25 For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

2 Peter 3:3-7 First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. [4] They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” [5] But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. [6] By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. [7] By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

1 John 4:5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.

Rev. 21:8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars--their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

### ***God Uses The Gospel To Bring Seekers To Salvation . . .***

Romans 1:16-17 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. <sup>17</sup>For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

1 Cor. 1:17-25 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. <sup>18</sup>For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup>For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." <sup>20</sup>Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup>For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

1 Cor. 2:1-5 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. <sup>2</sup>For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup>I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. <sup>4</sup>My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup>so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Galatians 6:12 Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.

Acts 11:18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Acts 13:48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Ephes. 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one can boast.

### *... And God Uses Believers To Bring The Gospel To Seekers*

2 Cor. 2:14-16 But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. [15] For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. [16] To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?

To the mother of James and John in Matthew 20:21 "What is it you want?" he asked.

To the two blind beggars in Matthew 20:32 Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

To James and John, sons of Zebedee in Mark 10:36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

To the blind man in Mark 10:51 "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

To the blind man in Luke 18:41 "What do you want me to do for you?"

To Andrew and Philip in John 1:38 Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

Philip. 1:27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel

Philip. 2:14-15 Do everything without complaining or arguing, <sup>15</sup>so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe

Col. 4:5-6 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. <sup>6</sup>Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

1 Thes. 4:11 Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you,

1 Tim. 3:1,7 Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. . . He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

1 Tim. 6:1 All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.

Titus 2:1-5 You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. <sup>2</sup>Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. <sup>3</sup>Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. <sup>4</sup>Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, <sup>5</sup>to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

Philemon 1:6 I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

1 Peter 2:12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

1 Peter 2:15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

1 Peter 2:17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

1 Peter 3:1 Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives,

1 Peter 3:15-16 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup>keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Jude 1:22 Be merciful to those who doubt . . .

Acts 2:37-39 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (38) Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (39) The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Acts 16:29-32 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. (30) He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (31) They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." (32) Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

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## Appendix J: Cumberland Community Church Statement of Practice

### *Grace - Committing to the Master*

- 1. God:** We believe that experiencing the presence of God in our individual lives and in our church is the definition of success. (John 13-17; 14:15-21; 15:1-8; Col. 1:6; Heb. 12:15; 2 Peter 3:18; Eph. 2:19-22)
- 2. Worship:** We believe that our highest calling is to love, honor, and worship Jesus Christ individually and in community. (John 4:21-26; 1 Cor. 3:9b; 16-17; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5a)
- 3. Truth:** We believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and an obedient response to annointed teaching is the catalyst for life-change. (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Luke 8:1-15; John 8:31-32; John 17:17; Rom. 12:7; James 1:23-25)
- 4. Prayer:** We believe that the church thrives when believers are devoted to individual and corporate prayer. (Luke 6:12-13; 11:1-13; Acts 2:42; 6:4; Col. 4:2)

### *Growth - Committing to Maturity*

- 5. Commitment:** We believe that the pursuit of full devotion to Christ and His Kingdom should be the norm, not the exception. Devoted followers yearn for continuous growth and giving expressed in the church. (1 Cor. 15:58; Col. 1:28; 3:23; Phil. 1:6,21; Hebrews 12:1)
- 6. Community:** We believe that devoted followers of Christ grow best as they involve themselves in loving, accountable relationships. (Psa. 133:1; Prov. 27:7; John 13-17; Acts 2:44-47; 1 Cor. 13; Eph. 4:25-26,32; 2 Peter 1:5-9)

### *Giving - Committing to Ministry*

- 7. Service:** We believe that devoted followers of Christ should operate as a unified community of servants using their spiritual gifts for the common good. (1 Cor. 12, 14; Rom. 12; Ephesians 4:9-16; John 13:1-17; Phil. 2:1-11; 1 Peter 4:10-11)
- 8. Stewardship:** We believe that devoted followers of Christ should operate as a unified community of servants stewarding their financial resources for the common good. (Prov 3:9-10; 2 Cor. 8:1-7)

### *Going - Committing to Missions*

- 9. Responsibility:** We believe that people matter to God and that it is the responsibility of every believer to bring those closest to him or her to a time and place where they can hear about Jesus Christ. (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Luke 5:29-32; Luke 15:1-31)
  - 10. Relevance:** We believe that the church, and the presentation of the gospel, should be authentic, relevant and doctrinally pure. (John 4: 1-10; 1 Cor. 9:19-23)
  - 11. Excellence:** We believe that excellence honors God and inspires people. (Malachi 1:6-14; 1 Cor. 15:58; Col. 3:17,23)
  - 12. Missions:** We believe that it is the responsibility of every member to develop an awareness of and actively support God's work in their community and around the world. (Matt. 18:14; 28:18-20)
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