Dodgy Doctrines

The Seeker Sensitive Service

Some months ago, the Lord drew my attention to a booklet titled ***The Seeker Sensitive Service*** **(1997) by Jane Williams**, and so, aware there are problems with the Seeker Sensitive (SS) method of evangelism, I read it and made some comments. Below is an extract from my longer document which I hope you might find useful…

Introduction: What is the Seeker-Sensitive Method of Evangelism?

"In the seeker sensitive church, mission is the priority" [Ed Dobson, quoted in JW, p.8].

It is, of course, true that unsaved people matter very much to God – and to Christians. It is not their stated desire for mission to unbelievers that is the problem with Seeker Sensitive churches, but the methods they use, and the consequent distorting of biblical doctrine, to achieve it.

(I) Seeker Sensitive Does Evangelism Man's Way Rather Than God's Way

The primary problem with the SS method of evangelism, as depicted in this booklet, is that instead of going to God's infallible Word to learn how *God* would have us evangelise the lost, SS tries to reach the unsaved – those to whom they refer as the "unchurched" - through man's fallible reasoning.

"[W]hat sort of service would be most likely to reach them" [JW, p.4].

No church service, *per se*, will reach the unsaved, and nowhere does the Bible tell us it will. According to Scripture, church services are for the saved, and the preaching of the Gospel is for the unsaved.

"Churches that are most successful…" [JW, p.6].

Most successful in what sense? It is crucial that we distinguish between *numerical* growth and *spiritual* growth.

(II) Seeker Sensitive Uses Man's Terminology Rather Than God's Terminology

The booklet does not speak of bringing the unsaved to the Cross of Jesus Christ, only of bringing the "unchurched" to church. This overlooks the reality that being "churched" doesn't mean someone is saved; it just means they go to church. There are many people in church pews who have been "churched" all their lives, but they are not actually saved. They are church-goers; but they are not Christians. Scripture does not speak of the unsaved as "unchurched".

(III) Seeker Sensitive Says Man Seeks God Rather Than God Seeks Man

"The word 'seeker' might be misleading" [JW, p.3].

The booklet is right to query whether the unsaved are actively seeking God; the Bible says they are not: *"[T]here is none that calleth upon thy name"* (Isaiah 64:6a); *"There is none that seeketh after God"* (Romans 3:11). Nevertheless, its thesis is predicated on the mistaken belief that the "unchurched" *are* in fact seeking God, but that they will be put off from finding Him if the "churched" do not adapt their church meetings to meet the cultural expectations of the "unchurched".

(IV) Seeker Sensitive Has the Mind of the World Rather Than the Mind of Christ

"Finding out concerns and prejudices of the unchurched is crucial to the whole process" [JW, p.4] … *"We will only be able to build bridges from the church into the community if we know where the community is, in its activities and in its thinking"* [Margaret Parker, quoted in JW, p.7].

Here, the "churched" (Christians) are effectively being encouraged to put off the *"mind of Christ"*, which the Bible instructs us to cultivate after salvation and put on once again the mind of the god of this world, in order to attract the "unchurched" into church and keep them there once they have come in. But believers know where unbelievers are in their concerns, prejudices, activities and thinking because believers were once there too. A saved thief isn't encouraged to return to stealing to "build bridges" to unsaved thieves, and neither do Christians need to think again *"after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world"* (Colossians 2:8) to be able to

bring the Gospel to the "unchurched". Rather, we can tell them that we too have *"been there, done that, and got the T-shirt, but I can show you a better way."*

(V) Seeker Sensitive Says Church is for the Unsaved Rather Than for the Saved

"Most of church life is geared for believers ... we fail to recognize that people without this background find it difficult to identify with" [JW, p.6] ... *"Many aspects of our church worship ... create problems for the unchurched"* [JW, p.7].

This is quite simply because church isn't designed for unbelievers; church is for believers. Unbelievers *"find it difficult to identify with church life"* because they are unsaved. If we were to attend meetings of any group, club, society, etc, we would not be able to identify with that group *until we become suitably qualified* – which for the "unchurched" is salvation. If one were to attend a service in a Muslim mosque, the adherents of that religion would not be expected to reorganise their meetings for the benefit of non-Muslims, yet the Seeker Sensitive model expects Christians to accommodate the requirements of non-Christians in our church services.

"[T]hey should not be expected to fit our mould" [JW, p.8] ... *"[W]hat sort of church is needed for unbelievers"* [Ed Dobson, quoted in JW, pp.8-9].

Much of the booklet discusses how the "churched" might adapt their church services in accordance with the desires and expectations of the "unchurched". But the purpose and function of the Church is to teach, edify, encourage, exhort, and build up the (saved) Body of Christ, and local church meetings are for believers to worship God in hymns and prayers, the reading and expounding of the Scriptures, and the sharing together of the Communion Supper. That is not to say, of course, that we cannot invite non-Christian family and friends to a church service, but Scripture does not allow us to redefine Church worship to accommodate them.

(VI) Seeker Sensitive Uses the World's Culture Rather Than Biblical Culture

I address this in more detail in my longer document. Here, for brevity, I have just picked out a couple of quotes from the booklet and overlooked the rest...

"There is a huge chasm between [the world's] culture and the church's culture" [JW, p.6].

This is because the world's culture is of *"the spirit of the world"*, while the Church's culture is of *"the spirit which is of God"* (1 Corinthians 2:12). The unsaved man *"receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Corinthians 2:14), whereas for the Christian *"old things are passed away"* (2 Corinthians 5:17b).

"Our music, heroes, language and taboos are far removed from the unchurched community ... who don't understand our language. We must learn the language and the culture of the unchurched" [Ed Dobson, quoted in JW, p.7].

As previously stated, Christians already know *"the language and culture of the unchurched"*; we have come out of it and have no warrant from Scripture to return to it (e.g., Philippians 3:13-14; Revelation 18:4). Once an unbeliever is saved, they will soon grow familiar with the *"music, heroes, language and taboos"* of the Body of Christ - and, more so, as they grow in their walk with the Lord, they will *rejoice* in those things of which they once knew and understood nothing!

"At Willow Creek, musicians ... will play whatever they are asked to play ... to try to mix the two styles of music in one service doesn't work, and damages both" [JW, p.14].

It is indeed true that the world's music and the Church's music can't mix: *"Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds: lest the fruit of thy seed which thou hast sown, and the fruit of thy vineyard, be defiled. Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together. Thou shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woollen and linen together"* (Deuteronomy 22:9-11). God hates mixture; our worship of Him must be pure. Seeker Sensitive musicians acquiesce to the requests of the *"unchurched"* to play the world's music in God's House, not grasping that *"divers seeds"* (the world's music) defiles the *"vineyard"* (the Church) thus destroying our worship of God *"in spirit and in truth"* (John 4:23-24).

At some stage every new Christian must take up their cross and live the real Christian life, which is one of sacrifice, death to self, and very often suffering and persecution. How are *"seekers"* going to do that? They have been *"churched"* (not saved) with

music and entertainment, little, if at all, different from that with which they have been very comfortable in the world.

(VII) Seeker Sensitive Adheres to Church Growth Rather Than to the Bible

The goal of the Church Growth Movement is to add vast numbers of people to the Church in order that the Church can bring about God's Kingdom on earth. Hence, corporate *"churching"* of the *"unchurched"*, rather than salvation of the individual is necessary – the ultimate aim of evangelism here being *"the establishing of the Kingdom of God apart from Christ's return"* [Tricia Tillin, *Mainstream*, (Summer 1994), p.8].

(VIII) Seeker Sensitive "Experiments" Rather Than Obeying God's Word

"[E]xperiment and take risks … not everything that is attempted is going to work out" [JW, p.9] … *"Where SS have failed, it has usually been because of lack of preparation, congregation not sharing the vision and having ownership of the venture"* [JW, p.10].

It certainly won't *"work out"* if it's done man's way or if it's not biblical. Where does the Lord Jesus say we must *"experiment and take risks"* in our methodology when bringing the Gospel to the lost? Seeker Sensitive fails not for *"lack of preparation, congregation not sharing the vision and having ownership of the venture"*. It fails because it is unbiblical. It fails because it is disobedient to Scripture. It fails because it is trying to grow churches man's way instead of God's way.

(IX) Seeker Sensitive Preaches Pragmatism Rather Than Truth

"The experience of Willow Creek has been that secular society asks the question, 'Does it work?' rather than 'Is it true?' … People are asked to 'try it' while considering whether or not they can 'believe it'." [JW, p.16].

"Where in Scripture does Jesus suggest unbelievers *"try"* the Gospel? No, the biblical way of evangelizing the "unchurched" is to preach the Gospel → whence the Holy Spirit will convict of sin → leading to repentance → salvation → and joining the Christian Church. *"Trying it"* and *"mak[ing] the transition … to a Christian view"* does not equate to coming under the conviction of the Holy Spirit when confronted with our sinful, lost state, repenting, and receiving new life in Jesus!

(X) Drinking the Tea: Deception & Discernment

Is it possible to just accept the good bits and eschew the bad bits of the Seeker-Sensitive model of evangelism and *"doing church"*? Well, can we drink the tea and spit out the milk or is it impossible to separate the two?...

Before He returned to heaven, when asked by His disciples what would be the sign of His return and the end of the world, the Lord Jesus instructed them to *"take heed that no man deceive you … many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many"* (Matthew 21:1-44; 25:1-13). Paul likewise warned the readers of his letters: *"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away [apostasy] first"* (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

The Lord warned His disciples against being deceived four times more than He warned them of any other sign of His second coming, this it behooves us to not just accept every new thins that claims to be "good", but to be careful to test it and prove that it *is* so (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). As we see the dumbing down of worship and of the preaching of the Word in so many churches today, we surely need to take His words very seriously, and cultivate discernment.

The problem is that such a lackadaisical attitude to God's Word can lead to believers being *"beguiled"* by the enemy and *"corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ"* into receiving *"another Jesus … another spirit … another gospel"* (2 Corinthians 11:3-4). Sadly, this is precisely what has happened in Seeker-Sensitive style churches.

Praise God that, despite such misguided attempts to 'improve' upon God's perfect method of evangelism and *"doing church"*, He has promised that *He* will build His Church, upon the Solid Rock of the Lord Jesus Christ, and *"the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:18).

Elizabeth McDonald, Extracts from *Ten Problems with Seeker Sensitive Evangelism*, (4th May 2024 / Oct 2023)

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