

Do Dogs Go to Heaven or Just Seeker-Friendly Churches?

Over the years, I've had a number of people ask me if dogs go to heaven. That's the subject of hot debate, but it turns out some dogs do go to church.

I'm not sure if it's a publicity stunt or **seeker-friendly church** strategies gone to the dogs, but a Methodist church in Maryland is inviting canine congregants to dress up in their Sunday morning best and listen to the **gospel**.

According to an Associated Press article, Rev. Al Deal plans to bark out a sermon to churchgoers and their four-legged friends. Deal figures, "For those who love their pets ... they are part of the family." Maybe so, but what redeeming value is there in inviting loyal Spot to Sunday morning service? Here's Deal's reasoning, as the AP reports it:

"Not only do many pet owners love their animals like children, he said, 'There are some folks who don't like leaving their pets, especially dogs, at home alone. I thought it would be nice if they could be provided with a warm, welcoming and comforting place to worship with their canine companions. And Mt. Zion United Methodist Church is just the place. I refer to Mt. Zion as the little church with the big heart.'"

And maybe a few big dogs?

The AP reports that, depending on how the service goes, Deal envisions having a Sunday school for folks with their dogs. He's also considering allowing cats to attend future pet-friendly services. As Deal sees it, "It is very important for the church to recognize the deep connection between people and their pets if they want to minister to the whole person and to what makes that person whole."

What? C'mon now. This is seeker-friendliness in an extreme form! It goes right along with **pastors** who drink beer in pub-based Bible study and other clever church-growth gimmicks pastors have dreamed up in years past. Just because God instructed Noah to bring animals into the ark—and just because **God** cares for animals—doesn't mean He wants them in His holy sanctuary.

I suppose this is a take-off on "Bring Your Dog to Work Day," but what about the faithful **church** members who are allergic to doggy dander or scared senseless of Spot and fearful of Fido? What about the cleaning staff that gets to scrub urine off the carpet, pick up doggy doo-doo and vacuum the trail of shedding fur from long-hair breeds? What about the distraction it causes for those who truly need a life-changing word and only hear barking, whining or pet owners trying to settle their pawed friends in the pews?

As it turns out, Deal is not alone in his beliefs—and he's not the first to employ this seeker-friendly strategy. "Take Your Pet to Church Day" appears to be catching on—but at what cost? Has anyone thought about how the experience might stress the animals? Bringing in pets to sit in pews isn't practically ministering to the animal—they can't understand the message—and Spot may not enjoy being confined in the building with a bunch of strangers and loud music.

Before you send your hate mail, please consider that I have nothing against animals. I once had a Dalmatian I really loved, and my daughter has a cute little critter even now. (Of course, her wise youth pastors won't allow her to bring it into the church!)

If the **church** wanted to have a picnic and let folks bring their pets, that would be a wonderful way for pet lovers to fellowship together. But do we really want to start opening our churches to parishioners' personal pets in the name of ministering to the whole person? Do we really, as Deal

contends, need to minister to both people and their pets? Would Jesus bring a pet poodle to the temple? Did the apostle Paul invite cats to the church at Ephesus? What do these types of services really say about the state of the church? Sound off.

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