

How Seeker-Friendly Churches Hurt America

Many churches in America, sadly including many mega-churches, pride themselves on being “seeker-friendly,” by which they mean they are not judgmental and mean like those angry fundamentalists. Carrie Underwood famously supports same-sex marriage and attends a church whose pastor has so blurred the edges on the issue of homosexuality that his parishioners are likely confused about whether God is concerned about the issue at all.

Such seeker-friendly churches typically try to appeal to the unchurched by giving short shrift to the hard sayings in the Scriptures and the firm, fixed, and unalterable moral standards found there. This is because they fear seekers will find them too harsh, too difficult and too out of phase with contemporary culture. Because such controversial truths might run seekers off, it’s best to avoid them entirely and talk endlessly and exclusively about how nice, kind and understanding God is.

And so, as G.K. Chesterton observed, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”

Now there is nothing wrong with being friendly toward those who are seeking the truth. Of course, we want to have open hearts to all, and patiently explain the truths of Christianity to all who have a sincere desire to find out more about God. But patiently explaining the hard truths of Scripture to seekers is much different than avoiding them altogether or so twisting them that they are explained away.

It’s one thing for a man to be a friend of sinners, but it’s another for him to be such a friend of sinners that he becomes

an enemy of God by betraying His Word. Such a “friend” of sinners may only be paving their way to a Christless eternity.

Now seeker-friendly churches assure us they will eventually get around to introducing fresh converts to the edgier truths of Scripture. But my question has always been, “When?” When exactly will you do this? Will it be in a main service where the bulk of seekers are? Or will it be in a small, little-publicized setting which minimizes the risk of too many people hearing it, as if these were truths that are too embarrassing for civilized society? Or will it happen at all?

Jesus was the most seeker-friendly evangelist who ever walked the earth. His whole mission was to “seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10b). And yet there were times when His teaching was so hard for the average seeker to stomach that the crowds began deserting Him in droves.

When He began urging His followers to eat his flesh and drink his blood and declared that He alone was “the bread which came down from heaven” (John 6:58), they did not respond by saying “Where can I sign up?” “When they heard this, many of His disciples said, ‘This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it? ... From that time many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him” (John 6:60, 66).

Things got so bad that Jesus even wondered about the Twelve. “Do you also want to go away?” (John 6:67). Peter’s response suggests they were thinking about it, but finally resolved to stay. “To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

This, of course, is not to say we should be disagreeable or deliberately try to run people off. But it is to say that fidelity to the Word is more important than church growth.

When Paul met with the Ephesian elders, he reminded them twice that he had declared to them the full revelation of God, even

those parts that were hard for him to preach and hard for them to hear. "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable ... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:20, 27, ESV).

The fact that Paul said twice he did not shrink back indicates that he had to think about it and was tempted to do it. There was risk of blow-back involved, and Paul was as human as anyone else. He had to make a deliberate decision to take a deep breath and teach things he knew would be controversial, even to leaders in the church of Christ, let alone to outsiders and to seekers.

The word translated "shrink" (Greek *hupostello*) literally means to "withhold under or out of sight." Yeah, it's there, and we have to keep it in stock, but we're going to keep it under the counter where nobody will see it and we're gonna hope we don't have to bring it out and actually show it to anyone.

But Paul steeled himself to teach not only the pleasant things of God's counsel but its difficult and challenging parts, too. Why? Because the hard parts are "profitable," just like the fun parts. Truth-hungry people benefit from hearing them and conversely are deprived of something important and valuable by not hearing them.

There are many, many "hard sayings" in the Word of God, beginning, of course, with the quite exclusive declaration of Scripture that Christ and Christ alone is the way to God and eternal life. But that's just for openers.

There is the plain assertion that the world did not evolve but that God created it in six 24-hour days around 6,000 years ago. The plain truth that homosexual behavior is not OK but deviates from God's design for sexual conduct and brings God's judgment on any society that embraces it. The plain truth that marriage is exclusively the union of a man and a woman and

that any other arrangement is counterfeit and should never be embraced in culture or in law. The plain truth that man is not naturally good, as the world wants us to believe, but born with a propensity to sin.

The plain truth that there are two and only two genders, not 58 as Facebook wants us to believe. The plain truth that men and women are not interchangeable but have distinctly different roles to play in marriage, family and the church. (You want a hard saying? I give you, "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man" [1 Timothy 2:12a]. How many sermons have you heard on that, unless it's to explain it all away?)

The plain truth that homosexual behavior will keep a man out of the kingdom of God as surely as any other sin. The plain truth that unrepentant sin in a believer's life at some point must meet up with church discipline, as Jesus himself taught us (see Matt. 18:15-20).

The cost to American culture from this kind of weakness and timidity is enormous. As Martin Luther King Jr. observed, the church is the conscience of America. Its pulpits are to "flame with righteousness," as a quote attributed to de Tocqueville has it.

When America's pastors no longer have the courage of their convictions, America begins to drift from its moorings. It loses its moral center. Its conscience becomes dull. The American people, including their politicians, can no longer tell right from wrong because they aren't being told the difference by those who are entrusted with the oracles of God.

A gyrocompass is an amazing device used in ships and airplanes because no matter where it's put, it always enables the pilot to find the horizon and identify truth north, especially in rough weather. The Word of God is our cultural and spiritual

gyrocompass. It's time for America's pastors to steer by it
once again. {eoa}