

What the Church Can Learn From Starbucks' Bold Stance on Gay Marriage

This past week during Starbucks' annual shareholders meeting, CEO Howard Schultz shut down an investor who asked if the company's support of a **gay marriage** initiative in Washington state was to blame for a disappointing earnings season.

Shultz responded, "Some things are not a financial decision." His bold words brought immediate applause from the other shareholders. Shultz then added that if the investor didn't like the company's position, he was welcome to "sell [his] shares ... and buy shares in another company. Thank you very much."

Shultz's comments were celebrated in the meeting; however, days later those same remarks created a firestorm in the evangelical community as calls to "Dump Starbucks" began going viral across the Internet.

It is surprising to see the shock my fellow Christian coffee addicts are displaying at the moment. This is not a new position for the company; it is just the boldest they've stated it to date.

I strongly oppose Starbucks' position of "marriage equality." But I can respect the fact that they are willing to hurt their own bottom line rather than compromise their convictions. Imagine the possibilities if every Christian leader would do the same. Is there something we can learn from a company willing to put principles before profits? I believe there is.

Some Things Are Not a Financial Decision

Don't miss the significance of Shultz's statement. Starbucks is

in business to make money, but in the past few years the company has chosen to invest its influence and resources to simultaneously champion causes. The company believes it's the right thing to do and that some things are not a financial decision.

True Christian leaders understand that every decision is first and foremost a spiritual decision, not a financial one. Our first question should never be, "How much is this going to cost?" Yes, cost is an important question, but it's not the most important one. The first question should be, "What is right?" This is a spiritual question that leads a leader to make spiritual decisions. It requires you to search Scripture for God's principles. It requires you to invest time on your knees to get a clear word from the Lord so that you can say, "This is what God has said."

I've been in more meetings than I care to admit where we were asking the wrong questions at first. It's so easy to fall into the trap of being led by "How much?" when you haven't first determined "What's right?"

Increasingly, churches are having to count the costs associated with taking bold stances. A good friend of mine was invited to minister in a city on the West Coast. On his way to the church from the airport, the pastor instructed him not to preach against homosexuality. The church had already faced tremendous **persecution** from the gay community in the area and was fearful of the costs to the congregation. The church leaders had been intimidated into a position of silence.

More and more, ministers are feeling pressure to tone down their message. They are fearful that preaching the hard truth may threaten the church's 501(c)(3) status, that tithes and offerings will decline or that they may lose their standing within the community. The cost is too great to jeopardize the ministry over divisive moral issues.

But isn't that exactly where the church is needed most? Now is not the time for the city set upon the hill to extinguish its light. This nation needs our voice!

Leaders justify the silence, saying, "This is an issue we have chosen not to focus on." They remind their members that the church is supposed to be a house full of compassion and that the best way to win is with love.

This is only half true. The church is at its best when it is full of *compassion* and full of *conviction*. That is the example Jesus set. He was unconditional in His love, and He was unwavering in his conviction. It was His love that drew the multitudes, and it was His convictions that drove them away. His radical commitment to both changed the world.

There is a cost to doing what is right—especially when the prevailing winds of public opinion are blowing against you. Starbucks has polling data on its side. The church is now finding many of its convictions on the opposite side of that fight. Are we willing to put our money where our mouth is and stand up for what we know is right?

Sell Your Shares

Shultz added if you don't like their position, then "sell your shares." He made it clear that Starbucks will not compromise its convictions to keep you in their company. It is time spiritual leaders do the same!

Consider how different the Starbucks approach is to the one we are watching play out with the Boy Scouts of America. LGBT groups are calling for boycotts, companies are pulling their funding and the secular media is keeping the organization in the spotlight. Outside pressure has forced the organization into an internal debate that has dragged on for months.

What if the **Boy Scouts** had said, "This is who we are. If you don't like it, 'sell your shares.'" That position wouldn't

have been political, but it would have been principled. In some ways, the Scouts have already lost because they've proven that their convictions are open for debate. They will change. It may not be this year, but it will happen. The fact that we are watching the discussion means they've already shown they're willing to compromise.

Convictions are a vital part of your core. Changing them is impossible because it means changing everything. I admire churches and leaders who are unapologetic in their values. They refuse to give an inch even when potential donors tempt them with large checks attached to preconditions. They make it clear, "You can keep your money. We will keep our convictions."

If the church compromises today, it will be irrelevant tomorrow.

Why This Matters

I am a firm believer that the role of the church in society is one of transformation. However, there is a shift taking place. Businesses are no longer staying out of the public debate on moral issues. Growing their brand is not their sole focus; they are looking to advance their cause as well. Corporations like Starbucks are now significantly shaping the culture around us. Are we passing this opportunity to corporations because we have become too focused on growing our own brands? I'm simply posing the question.

What would happen if the entire body of Christ became united and spoke with one voice concerning what is right? Imagine what a difference that could have made this past week. What were we doing as the Supreme Court was hearing arguments that could set precedent to redefine the biblical definition of marriage? This past week, the biggest headlines came from a secular company taking an unapologetic secular stance on the issue. Where was the voice of the church?

Have we heeded the advice of some Christian leaders and recognized we are on the “wrong side” of the issue and that it’s time to “adapt or die”? Are we adopting a position of silence? Have we counted the cost and decided it’s not something worth fighting for?

Marriage is a sacred issue before it is a state issue. If the church chooses not to use its voice at this time, we leave God’s gift of marriage in the hands of politicians, political action groups and lobbyists. If we are complacent at this time, America becomes the casualty of our compromise.

It’s time to learn a lesson from Starbucks. The company has found conviction alongside its coffee and caffeine. Perhaps we can as well.

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