

Why You Should Attend a Sinner-Sensitive Church

The church is not a place to hide from sinners. It's time we cast aside our judgment and make everyone feel welcome.

Author Flannery O'Connor once noted that "sometimes you have to suffer as much from the church as you do for it." This has certainly been my experience—and that of many others I know. That's because the church tends to judge those who don't live up to its standards.

Take the church I grew up in, for example. I was raised in a very strict church in which rules and regulations smothered the concept of grace by their sheer weight. No jewelry for women. No mixed bathing (swimming). No musical instruments in the church other than a piano or organ.

No long hair for men. No short hair and no pants for women. No shorts. No cussing. No makeup. No card playing. No movies. No dancing. No smoking. No drinking.

The list of nos went on and on. The sad thing was, some of the things allowed in this church were actually more repulsive than the things banned. Things such as racism and bigotry.

There was not a stated policy, but you never would have seen a "colored" (our loving and enlightened term for African Americans) in our church. It was just understood. They had "their" churches, and I guess we thought it was OK for "them" to worship "our" God if "they" had the decency to be discreet about it.

Members of our church also railed against Jews. I heard statements from the pulpit that the Jews were ruining our country, while the fact that the Savior happened to be one was ignored. And don't even begin to mention "queers" or

“sodomites,” as we so colorfully called the gay population.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ time received severe rebukes from the Lord for this type of hypocrisy. These religious leaders were dogmatic about performing religious rituals—and quick to condemn those who didn’t participate. But they were sorely lacking in qualities Jesus considered even more important.

The church today is no different. We condemn those who drink and smoke and live immoral lives while we churchgoers engage in gluttony and gossip and selfishness and bigotry.

No wonder so many people feel so alienated from the church. I often feel alienated—and I’m a member of this club!

But Jesus’ church is not a highbrow Christian country club. The church should exclude no one. The church should welcome those unwelcome anywhere else. Anyone can attend.

And yet most churches are not a place where people feel comfortable if they are living a life that is not moral. In fact, the church is often a place where most people don’t feel comfortable if they’re just living life!

In my hometown of Chillicothe, Ohio, an acquaintance finally decided it was time to get his family into a local church. He loaded up the crew and visited one nearby. The church immediately showed a tremendous and heartfelt concern for issues.

You see, Roy had the audacity to show up in God’s house with a full beard, not unlike Jesus’ in the picture hanging in the foyer. A church leader met Roy on the way out.

“So are you going to start worshiping with us?” he asked.

“Why yes,” Roy replied. “We want to start coming to church.”

The church leader looked at him and said, “Well, I hope you will have shaved by next Sunday.” That was more than 20 years

ago. Roy still has not found a regular church home.

Apart from God's grace and the maturity to see each human being as His creation, we are prone to reject those who are different from us. Have you ever wished that certain people wouldn't speak or be so prominent in your congregation? You would be more comfortable bringing unchurched friends if those slightly embarrassing brothers and sisters weren't there, or at least were invisible.

My family reunion would look much better (trust me) if it were by invitation only. But when you include the entire family, you get a few embarrassments. And your family is no doubt the same.

So it is with my church family. That is a simple fact, given what we have to work with: sinners.

We need to trust God with those who are a little embarrassing to those of us who are not. (How amazing that our prideful minds can even think like that!) We might even take the bold step of befriending them.

Sensitive to Sinners

I recall dating a girl long before I met my beloved wife, Joni. I asked her to go to church with me.

She was not a Christian and did not know the "official" rules. She arrived at church wearing a strapless dress that the congregation found scandalous. In her mind she was simply wearing her best dress to church; she had no idea she was doing anything "wrong."

From the moment we walked in, the two of us felt the saints' reproachful laser-beam stares of righteousness drilling into us. Instead of asking God to make my friend's heart receptive to His Word, I spent the service worrying about what this pea-brained congregation thought of me.

The reactions would have been different in a sinner-sensitive church. The sinner-sensitive church (SSC) is my proposal for a new church movement toward making everyone feel welcomed and loved. The SSC would model nonjudgmental attitudes.

Issues such as having tattoos, body piercings and weird hair would not necessarily denote demon possession. The SSC would pledge not to gossip because we would realize that it is only by the grace of God that we are not the current targets. The SSC would value every spiritual, physical and financial gift, no matter how big or small.

The SSC would make it a practice to reach out, touch and care for one another sacrificially because we know that we all fall down in life and in our Christian walks. At the SSC we would have executives holding hands in prayer with laborers and not thinking twice about it. Blacks and whites and Hispanics and others would break bread together because we are all sinners in the eyes of a colorblind God.

The SSC would give freely out of profound gratitude to a God who somehow saw fit to give us an undeserved chance. We would practice the prodigal son ministry, running to welcome those returning from mistakes and bad decisions and sin.

Our members would get involved in other people's lives. We would hold our brothers and sisters accountable to godly standards.

Marriage would be cherished. Families would have a community of support during problems and trials. The congregation of the SSC would not be so self-centered that we would demand the undivided attention of the pastor at every little crisis. Other believers would help meet many of those needs that we now prefer to leave to the "professional Christians" on staff.

The SSC would also delight in the company of other spiritual travelers and make it a priority that no one ever felt alone. We would make one another feel valuable, but on occasion, a

little uncomfortable.

Being comfortable in church is not the primary goal. I am not always comfortable at the dentist's office. I often arrive in pain because I have neglected to do what I should have done.

The staff makes me feel welcome and cared for. Then the dentist confronts me with the truth: "You have let this go too long, and I must hurt you (a little) in order to heal you. You will have to pay a financial price and spend time recovering before you are completely well." Those are the facts of my dental hygiene sin.

The SSC church would not back off the truth either. Decay in the enamel or soul must be addressed.

We would tell one another the truth and explain that the process might be a little painful. We would participate in ongoing preventive maintenance and help one another deal with problems as soon as possible, before they became even more painful and expensive to fix.

The SSC would worship with enthusiasm, whether singing hymns or praise choruses, because God is worthy of that praise. The SSC would have a sense of profound reverence because we all have received God's grace, the most amazing gift ever offered. The SSC would be so excited about this grace that the incredible news of the gospel would be as much a part of who we are as our jobs and our families are.

Sinner-sensitive was the ministry style of our Lord. He was always available to people who realized their need.

What Would Jesus Do?

In fact, I marvel at the example of Christ and His approach to sinners. Obviously He did not condone the lifestyles and actions of many who surrounded Him.

Yet He seemed drawn to the spiritually needy—and they to Him. Prostitutes, lepers and tax collectors all felt the need to hear what Jesus had to say.

It seems that the people most uncomfortable around Jesus were the religious folks, the churchgoers as it were. Those who are most ill need the physician's time, and Jesus gravitated to the emergency-room cases.

He had little patience with those who failed to recognize their true spiritual symptoms (the Pharisees and other religious folk). But He was always willing to see the spiritually ill.

The church should be in the business of addressing spiritual illness. When you are deathly ill, you don't start thinking of going to the health club: "Well, this will be a good time to get in shape. I feel horrible, and I think I'm going to die."

Yet many churches have somehow communicated that only the spiritually healthy are truly welcome at church. Many people think their lives are too far gone to be accepted at church, when in fact that brokenness makes them ready to receive God's amazing grace.

But too many people feel that going to church would make them too uncomfortable or heighten their guilt. They sense they would be judged and treated with condescension.

Yes, some of these feelings are self-inflicted wounds. But more are not. We must examine the possibility that we are doing things that make hurting people stay away from the church.

Most of us don't much like to be around the truly spiritually ill. It tends to make us uncomfortable. Treating the spiritually ill is draining, and it comes with no guarantees

for success. We would rather hire someone to clean up the mess and report back to us at a praise service.

Yet how can we preach Christ's love and not care about the AIDS epidemic? How can we talk about God's grace but ignore other people's physical needs and bow to the idols of success and money and power?

How can we talk about the importance of giving and then spend money on things we don't need, often to curry the approval of people we don't really care about? How can we minister to others when we don't first meet the spiritual needs of our own families? How can we win the respect of the world when we cruise around in luxury sports cars and turn our faces away from homeless people?

Do we think that if we ignore the problems perhaps God will not hold us accountable?

Governed by Grace

Philip Yancey has written a wonderful book about grace titled *What's So Amazing About Grace?* that I would put on anyone's must-read list. One of his most compelling illustrations comes from an alcoholic friend who attends Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings.

His friend says: "When I'm late to church, people turn around and stare at me with frowns of disapproval. When I'm late to AA, the meeting comes to a halt, and everyone jumps up to hug me. They realize my lateness may be a sign that I almost didn't make it."

Wouldn't you love to see this scenario play out at a local church: I walk in as a visitor and stride to the front of the sanctuary during the multimedia drama presentation about accepting others' differences. I turn to the congregation and announce: "Hi! My name is Dave. And I'm a sinner."

“Hi, Dave!” the congregation responds. “We love you and are here to help.”

More likely an associate pastor would gently take me by the arm and try to lead me quietly away while a deacon called the straitjacket express. Today’s successful 12-step support groups have become what the body of Christ could and in fact should have become.

And though the roots of AA are firmly planted in Christian grace, why did it even have to be developed? Shouldn’t the church be the place to which such hurting men and women would instinctively be drawn to receive the help they need?

Even a quick study of the life of Christ would reveal that any of us could have quite comfortably walked into His “12 guy” program and announced our status as sinners. In fact, that little confession would have moved us right to the head of the class and could very well have made us the teacher’s pet.

So why has the local church repelled so many of those who have the very needs we are equipped, through Christ, to address? I realize that it is not entirely the fault of the church that the spiritually ill stay away. But it seems to me that we had better examine what part of the problem is our responsibility.

The church should be the most level playing field on earth. After all, in Jesus’ eyes, the soul of the Fortune 500 CEO is no more valuable than the soul of the crackhead down the alley.

That sort of thinking is uncomfortable and even scandalous for most of us because it contradicts our culture’s values. We honor looks, money, power and fame. Jesus cared about none of those.

In Luke 16:14-15 the gospel writer talked about “the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard these things [Jesus talking about the parable of the shrewd manager], and

they derided Him.” And He said to them: ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God’” (NKJV).

The popular saying What Would Jesus Do? can be a bit trite, but on the other hand it can pose a great spiritual question. Christians, like physicians, should vow to do no harm. But forgive us, Lord.

Because, in trying to keep people out of the “club,” we do.

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