

Ashamed Of The Gospel

Introduction. Pragmatism is the notion that meaning or worth is determined by practical consequences. To a pragmatist, if a technique or course of action has the desired effect, it is good. If it does not seem to work, it must be wrong. But scriptural and biblical truth is not determined by testing what "works" and what does not.

Churches today believe that compromise with the world is the only way to reach the world. Denominations and institutional churches are radically departing from their past stances in the Bible (as misguided as they might be). In a way, they are "ashamed of the gospel" (Romans 1:16). This shame is appearing in faithful churches with disastrous results.

I. ***The "User Friendly" Church***

- A. Church growth "experts" suggest that we should provide non-Christians with an agreeable, inoffensive environment. They need tolerance and anonymity. Always be positive and above all, keep everyone entertained. Most churches rely on music, skits, multimedia, and other means of communication to convey the message.
 1. One of the few out-of-place parts in churches today is clear and forceful preaching. Preaching, of course, has not been completely abandoned. Some of the "user friendly" churches offer at least one service a week where a spoken message is the centerpiece.
 2. But if you must have a sermon, keep it brief and amusing. Do not be preachy or authoritative. The style of the "user friendly" sermon is frequently psychological and motivational rather than biblical. "Felt needs" (loneliness, fear of failure, poor self-image, depression, anger, resentment, etc.), which are popular in "user friendly" churches, skirts the real problem of sin.
 3. "Target marketing" is a key concept in the "user friendly" church movement. The point being that knowing the product's market, the product itself can be developed to address the special needs of that segment, and the entire marketing effort can be designed with maximum efficiency.
 - a) Demographic information, community surveys, door-to-door polls, and congregational questionnaires are the new tools.
 - b) Information drawn from such sources are essential to building a workable marketing plan. Preachers are told they cannot reach people effectively without it.
- B. One large, well-known denominational church's bid "to perk up attendance at Sunday evening services" included a wrestling match featuring church employees. To train for the event, ten employees got

- lessons from Tugboat Taylor, a former professional wrestler, in pulling hair, kicking shins, and tossing bodies around without doing real harm.
- C. There is no denying that these antics draw a crowd. Many churches that have experimented with such methods report growing attendance figures. And a handful of megachurches have been able to fill huge auditoriums with thousands of people several times a week. A few of these megachurches resemble elegant country clubs or resort hotels. They feature impressive facilities with bowling lanes, movie theaters, health spas, restaurants, ballrooms, roller-skating rinks, and state-of-the-art gymnasiums.

II. ***The Foolishness And Power Of God***

- A. But does all of this work? The church's mission is not to present itself as an alternative to secular amusements (1 Thessalonians 3:2-6). This whole philosophy undermines sound doctrine by discarding Jesus' own methods of preaching and teaching as the primary means of work. It avoids strong convictions as divisive, unbecoming, or inappropriate. Instead of teaching error or denying truth, it does something far more subtle, yet just as effective from the enemy's point of view.
- B. The end result of this is the compromise of scripture. If the word of God is decentralized in order to forge a friendship with the world where hard truths are avoided, then we have given up on sin, judgment, and hell. The church cannot become glutted with men-pleasers (Galatians 1:10). Instead of exalting God, it denigrates what is precious to God.
1. Scripture says the early Christians "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). In our generation the world is turning the church upside down. What happened in Acts 5 with Ananias and Sapphira flies in the face of contemporary church-growth theory.
 2. The congregation was definitely not a place for sinners to be comfortable! Beginning with this incident in Acts 5, the sins of the saints became a perpetual problem for the church. Every epistle Paul wrote in the New Testament included something of major consequence about sin in the church (Romans 16:17-18).
- C. There is nothing in scripture indicating that elders should set numerical goals for church growth (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6-7). What if the Old Testament prophets had subscribed to such a philosophy? Jeremiah, for example, preached 40 years without seeing any significant positive response. On the contrary, he was severely persecuted (Jeremiah 11:19-23; 12:6; 16:2; 18:20-23; 20:1-2; 37:13-21). Paul furthermore shunned clever methods and gimmicks that might proselyte people to false conversions through fleshly persuasion (1 Corinthians 2:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6).

- D. The challenge for Christ's church is found in 2 Corinthians 7:1. It is not the cleverness of our methods, the techniques of our work, or the wit of our sermons that puts power in our work. We are not carnival barkers or commercial pitchmen. We are people trying to turn people away from eternal damnation. We are fighting a spiritual battle, and we cannot win by appeasing the enemy (Ephesians 6:10-12). Obedience to a holy God and faithfulness to His righteous standard are crucial.
- E. Read the literature of the "user friendly" movement and you will notice a preoccupation with conveying every message in a positive tone.
1. God does not expect people to come to a knowledge of the truth through human ingenuity. He chose the foolishness of preaching (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). People cannot reason their way to God or be led there by manipulation.
 2. If the plain truth of the gospel does not penetrate the heart, no amount of cajoling or salesmanship is going to bring a person to salvation. There is simply no way to synthesize the truth about God's wrath with a positive-only presentation of the gospel.
 3. For Paul, the threat of God's eternal wrath was the first point to be discussed (Romans 1:18). He was determined that people understand the awful reality of God's wrath and the heinousness of their sin. People's desire for a pleasing, attractive message is completely incompatible with the true gospel.
- F. In Acts 17:16, from a human perspective, Paul stood alone against centuries of paganism. He saw himself as a voice through which the power of God could be turned loose on the largest and most influential metropolis in that part of the world.
1. Paul's approach was direct and confrontational. He did not do a community survey. He did not conduct any special research. He did not adopt the spirit of the age. He just went to the synagogue and the marketplace and preached.
 2. The word most certainly did not return void (Isaiah 55:11). The threefold response of that day -- contempt, curiosity, and conversion -- is typical whenever the gospel is faithfully preached (Acts 17:32-34).
- G. Paul was utterly unwilling to remove the offense from the gospel (Galatians 5:11). He did not use methodology that catered to the lusts of his listeners. He did not amend or abridge his message to make people happy. He did not back down in the face of opposition or rejection. He was stubbornly devoted to the truth (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). To him, truth was something to be declared, not negotiated.

1. Paul was willing to give up all his rights and privileges, his position, his rank, his livelihood, his freedom, and his life to spread the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).
 2. He would behave so that he personally would never be an obstacle to anyone's hearing and understanding the message of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 9, he was describing an attitude of personal sacrifice, not compromise.
- H. The notion that the church must become like the world to win the world is overtaking denominations. The world now sets the agenda for the church. We are not immune to this temptation. What will it do to churches of Christ?
1. There are signs of brethren moving toward "performance" services.
 - a) More congregations are engaging in humming instead of singing during their worship service. Some groups use their voices to make instrumental sounds.
 - b) Singing groups and "worship teams" are beginning to appear. One church in Alabama used hidden microphones to amplify the voices of their "best" singers.
 - c) Some Vacation Bible Schools are putting more emphasis on acting, drama, and playing than on learning lessons from the text of the Bible.
 2. More and more preaching features "lighter" sermons which are non-controversial, uses virtually no scripture, and contains little solid, doctrinal content.
 3. Young Christians have become significantly more tolerant of activities once viewed as worldly or immoral -- including smoking, using marijuana, drinking, going to dances, attending R-rated movies, and premarital sex.

Conclusion. Human wisdom and human philosophy tend to make the state of humanity worse, not better. The "user friendly" philosophy downgrades worship, scripture, and doctrine. The answer is not a congregation that is unfriendly, but vibrant, loving, committed saints who truly seek one another's edification, not just carnal excitement (1 Corinthians 14:5, 26, 40).

Majority reaction and prosperity are not measures of truthfulness. Paul would not have understood preachers who, given the privilege of preaching the gospel, choose instead to entertain people, tell anecdotes, or give speeches on self-esteem. Never be afraid to be different when you are talking to people who attend churches that are ashamed of the gospel.