

Think on These Things

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I Feel a Need Coming On, A Look Behind the Scenes of the Market-Driven Church, Pt. 3 by Gary E. Gilley, Pastor-teacher

We Are Driven

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, has written the definitive book promoting the market-driven concept of evangelism and church growth. *The Purpose-Driven Church*, which admittedly has a considerable amount of practical and helpful advice, nevertheless is laced with a felt-need philosophy that undermines, in my opinion, the value of the whole book. It is Warren's view that in order to reach the lost we must begin with their felt needs (p. 197ff). He writes, "[For] anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart" (p.219). In order to discover the felt needs of the Saddleback Valley citizens he orchestrated a community survey of the unchurched (p.139). Once those needs were discovered, a program was implemented to reach the community by offering Jesus Christ, the gospel, and the church as a means of fulfilling those needs. Warren is so committed to this approach that written into the bylaws of Saddleback is this sentence, "This church exists to benefit the residents of the Saddleback Valley by providing for their spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual and social needs" (p.220).

In support of this philosophy Warren does a couple of things. First, he offers Jesus' example as a model for reaching the lost through the felt needs porthole (see pp. 197ff). Unfortunately for Warren's position the passages he uses are misunderstood, misapplied, and simply do not teach that Jesus reached the lost through felt needs. Quite the contrary, in Jesus' evangelism He always quickly got to the heart of the real need of his audience – their sin which separated them from God (e.g. John 3; 4; Mark 10:17-31) (in contrast to loneliness, poor self-esteem, lack of fulfillment, etc). Next Warren defends himself by stating, "Beginning a message with people's felt needs is more than a marketing tool! It is based on the theological fact that God chooses to

reveal himself to man according to *our* needs" (p.295). Warren offers no theological proof for this assertion of course, for there is none. The apostles would be absolutely dumbfounded to find their "God-centered" teachings twisted to make them so "man-centered."

This needs-oriented approach to the Christian life is so prevalent within the seeker-sensitive camp that the little jingle, "Find a need and meet it, find a hurt and heal it" has become the unofficial motto. Os Guinness observes, "Few would disagree that church-growth teaching represents a shift from the vertical dimension to the horizontal, from the theological to the practical, from the prophetic to the seeker-friendly, from the timeless to the relevant and contemporary, from the primacy of worship to the primacy of evangelism, and from the priority of Christian discipleship in all of life to the priority of spiritual ministries within the church. But what happens when the much-heralded new emphases are seen from the standpoint of the Scriptures to be quite simply wrong? And what happens if tomorrow's 'need' is for what is overlooked today" (*Dining with the Devil*, by Os Guinness, p. 84)?

Continuing with Guinness' line of questions we might ask: What are the new paradigm churches really offering that is attracting great throngs of people? Is this offering the same old message (the biblical message) in new wrapping, or is it a mutation of the real thing? And if it proves to be a mutation, what effect is it having, and will it have on the modern church?

The New Message

A. W. Tozer warned decades ago of a new wind blowing across the fields of the evangelical church, If I see aright, the cross of popular evangelicalism is not the cross of the New Testament. It is, rather, a new bright ornament upon the bosom of a self-assured and carnal Christianity. The old cross slew men; the

new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it.

— If only Tozer could see us now.

In our next paper we will examine the gospel message itself. In this one we want to look at the corollary and overlapping issue of mankind's need(s). What has happened, I believe, is that the evangelical church has become a reflector of our times rather than a revealer. "The problem is not that Christians have disappeared, but that Christian faith has become so deformed. Under the influence of modernity, we modern Christians are literally capable of winning the world while losing our own souls" (Guinness, p. 43).

A Personal Tale

How has this happened? What has changed our message from a force to a farce? A large part of the answer lies in the almost wholesale embracing of psychology by the Christian community. My first encounter with the encroachment of psychology upon the church was my senior year of Bible college in 1972. As I prepared for the pastorate at Moody Bible Institute, I had been immersed in the study of Scripture and theology. As a senior I was required to take a course in "pastoral counseling," which proved to be almost identical to a course in psychology that I had taken at the University of Virginia. That same year I was asked, along with several others, to be a RA in the dorm. As part of our preparation we were given training in the latest rage of pop-psychology, which by the way has since been relegated to the psychological junk heap. At the time I remember my wide-eyed amazement that all my studies in Scripture apparently did not equip me to deal with the real problems that would face me in my future ministry. Bible study and knowledge were great for salvation and sanctification, but there apparently existed a set of problems and needs "out there" that needed more than the "simplistic" solutions as found in God's Word. Scripture, after all the dust had cleared, needed help from Freud. Unable and ill-equipped to deal with my newfound knowledge, I tucked it away for safekeeping. Later, in the early days of pastoring, I decided to pursue a master's degree in psychology in order to help people with their "real" problems. But it soon became abundantly clear that something was seriously wrong. Virtually everything that I learned in my psychology courses contradicted the Scriptures. So, I ended my illustrious career as a would-be pastor/psychologist and went back to the study of Scripture, which has proven itself more than adequate throughout the years for every need and concern that has come my way. Meanwhile, immersed in my own ministry and the study of Scripture, I was somehow oblivious

to psychology's hijacking of the evangelical church during the 1970s and 80s. One day I awoke, sort of a Rip Van Wrinkle experience, to find that my world, the world of the church, had changed, and I had been left behind. Where had everyone gone? Most churches were now talking about dysfunctional families, poor self-images, co-dependency, addictions, 12-step programs, and needs, lots and lots of needs that the church was supposed to meet. More Christians were obtaining their philosophy for living from Oprah and Sally Jesse than from Jesus and Paul.

When Christian leaders saw this metamorphosis of God's people, a metamorphosis that they had helped create, they could either pull in the reins, denounce this caricature of the Christian faith and repent of their part in its birth, or they could jump on the float and join the parade. Most, recognizing that this is what the people now wanted, what they expected, what they had been trained to "need," choose the float approach. Give Christians the need-oriented pop-psychology that they had grown to love, they decided, just alter it a bit with a little Scripture and some references to Jesus — they would never catch on that what they were swallowing was not biblical Christianity at all, but an almost unrecognizable perversion. Whether this approach was calculated or naively taken matters little, the result is the same: a psychologized Christian community which no longer recognizes the difference between the teachings of Scripture and the teachings of Carl Rogers, and no longer cares.

Since the Christian was now indistinguishable in philosophy from the world, both having fallen in love with psychobabble, the offense of the cross became far less, well, offensive. It was only a short step for someone (Robert Schuller is a worthy candidate as we will see) to develop a psychologized church for the already psychologized Unchurched Harry (as the Willow Creekers call him). This would be a church that would offer the same things to Harry that secular society offered only better, since Jesus was better than a Carl Rogers, Oprah and Freud combined. And so it was — "The new paradigm churches, then, appear to be succeeding, not because they are offering an alternative to our modern culture, but because they are speaking with its voice, mimicking its moves" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 32).

A Little History

The church growth movement owes much to Robert Schuller, who claims to be its founder, at least in this country, by being the first to launch the marketing approach in Christianity. "The secret of winning unchurched people into the church," Schuller said, "is really quite simple. Find out what would impress the nonchurched in your community" then give it to them (as quoted in *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, by G.S. Pritchard, p. 51). Believing that

expository preaching is a waste of time, and borrowing the philosophy of his mentor Norman Vincent Peale, Schuller "began to communicate a message of Christianity that focused on meeting the emotional and psychological needs of people" (Pritchard, p. 53). Schuller laid out his philosophy of ministry in his 1982 book *Self Esteem: The New Reformation*, in which he called for a radical shift in the church's focus from God to human needs. The most important issue before Schuller was to determine through some means what was the deepest human need upon which the church should focus. He decided that mankind's deepest need was self-esteem, a "need," by the way, nowhere mentioned, alluded to or even hinted at in the Scriptures. He then went on to wrap his theology and church growth strategy around this all-important need. Originally Schuller's church growth philosophy met with scorn and denunciation by conservative Christians everywhere. But while Christian leaders held the theological front against need-oriented Christianity they were out-flanked by pragmatism. It just so happened that Schuller's methodology worked, and those who employed it were seeing exponential numerical growth in their churches. In most arenas truth doesn't stand a chance against success; this proved to be the case in the church growth wars.

If Robert Schuller was the architect of the user-friendly church, then Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community church, became the contractor. Working from the premise that, "The most effective messages for seekers are those that address their felt need" (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, pp. 214,215) it remained for Hybels and company to determine which felt needs most needed attention. Leading the pack, Hybels decided it was not self-esteem, although he did not reject it, but rather personal fulfillment (or the pursuit of happiness) followed by identity, companionship, marriage, family, relief of stress, meaning and morality (ibid., pp. 70-73). To Hybels, fulfillment was the felt need that encompassed and defined all others.

Since, to the founders of the new paradigm church, felt needs are the driving force behind the actions and attitudes of people, and since Christianity, Hybels would argue, is the best means to solve problems and satisfy the desire for fulfillment (ibid., p. 143), he developed the gospel of personal fulfillment. According to the research book *Willow Creek Seeker Services* by G. A. Pritchard, the canon within the canon at Willow Creek is that human beings can be fulfilled. Fulfillment permeates every venue at Willow Creek, even leading to a redefinition of sin. "Instead of only portraying sin as selfishness and a rebellion against God, Hybels also describes it as a flawed strategy to gain fulfillment" (ibid., p. 177).

It should be noted that while this felt need strategy is not derived from Scripture, coming clearly from secular psychology, it nevertheless would become the foundation of the new paradigm church.

The Repercussions

The result of psychology's invasion of our culture has been, as R. Albert Mohler, Jr. noticed, that "Americans are now fanatic devotees of the cult of self-fulfillment and personal autonomy" (*The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong, 'Evangelical': What's in a Name?" by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., p. 40). The role of the church has been to challenge the spirit of the age, for as Wells points out, "The church is in the business of truth, not profit" (*God in the Wasteland*, by David Wells, p. 76). Unfortunately, "the healers of our time – psychotherapists and advertisers – have extended their long reach into the life of the church as well. Our secular healers have populated the Church with their close cousins" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 197). Even "the language of theology has been replaced by the vocabulary of the therapeutic" (Mohler).

These new cousins have affected every aspect of church life. Take worship for example — New paradigm pastor Wes Dubin goes on the offensive when his entertainment oriented worship services are challenged. "It (worship) is not all gloom and doom," he states, "and all of us take our Bibles and just bore each other, let's show them that we can also have fun" (*In the Name of God*, video with Peter Jennings). There is a time for fun in the church but surely, "the purpose of worship is clearly to express the greatness of God and not simply to find inward release or, still less, amusement. Worship is theological rather than psychological" (*Losing Our Virtue*, p. 40).

And then there is the issue of sin. In a psychological world sin is reduced to sickness and addiction. The sinner is not seen as depraved, but as a victim. What is then lost is our capacity to understand life, and ourselves, as sinful. When the seeker-sensitive church adopts the language and theology of psychology it then attempts to dispense psychological prescriptions for life's issues rather than biblical ones, for after all, it reasons, the world now thinks within the framework of psychology and we must be relevant. Rather than challenge and confront the world's wisdom the modern church is seeking to sanctify it. The result is, as the prophet Jeremiah warned in his day, "They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially" (Jeremiah 6:14).

The emphasis on psychology is also changing the focus of the church. Pritchard is right when he says, "Instead of looking at God's face, this teaching suggests that individuals look in the distorted mirror of modern psychology" (Pritchard, p. 233). Pritchard claims that when he attended the church (ibid., pp. 227, 235), the majority of

the books sold in Willow Creek's bookstore were psychological and self-help books, with the decidedly anti-Christian *Codependent No More* by Melody Beattie the top seller. This accentuation on psychology, "instead of encouraging Creekers to know and love God, encourages them to know and accept themselves and develop a strong self-esteem. The goals and means of one's ethics change from a God-centered to a human-centered orientation.... Willow Creek Christians have accepted the psychological framework as foundational to their self-understanding and as a trustworthy guide for daily living" (Pritchard, p. 234).

Pritchard's assessment of the psychological influence at Willow Creek is lethal. "Ironically, while Hybels is evangelizing those in the world toward Christianity, he is also evangelizing Christians toward the world. As the unchurched Harrys in the audience (10 percent) move closer to Christianity, the Christians in the audience (90 percent) are often becoming more psychological and worldly.... In the effort to become relevant Willow Creek ironically is in danger of becoming irrelevant" (Pritchard, p. 238-239 — Percentages of Christians and non-Christians attending Willow Creek are estimates based upon the author's research).

Pritchard's critique of the need-oriented approach to "doing church" is worthy of quoting extensively:

The unintended consequences of this approach are that Hybels incorporates large chunks of the American psychological worldview into his basic teaching and teaches that fulfillment is a consequence of the Christian life. There is a lack of critical evaluation to Willow Creek's approach to relevance. This felt-need approach to relevance ultimately distorts their Christianity.

A more biblical approach to the current American fixation with fulfillment is to call it the *idolatry* that it is. Jesus does not guarantee that to follow him will make one fulfilled. In fact, at several points, the direct opposite is communicated: "I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:19); "I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34); "If they persecuted me they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). The temptation to say that Christianity will meet all one's needs and provide fulfillment is not true to biblical Christianity (Pritchard, p. 200 — emphasis mine).

Willow Creek's unintended failures result from an uncritical use of various cultural tools and ideas (marketing, psychology, media). In particular, their mistakes are rooted in a superficial understanding of the American culture and an inadequate grasp

of Christian theology (Pritchard, p. 207).

The seeker-sensitive experts would defend marketing as a tool they use to attract more Unchurched Harrys to hear the gospel. Methods change, the message stays the same, is the cliché. What they naively do not seem to understand is that the message will ultimately be shaped by the method. This is especially true of marketing since it, "shapes how one views the world. People become 'consumers' and 'target audiences.' These consumers have 'felt needs,' which 'research' discovers in order to modify the 'product' to meet these needs" (Pritchard, p. 244).

There exists a subtle yet important difference between the New Testament church and the new paradigm church. The church, the New Testament teaches, is to glorify God and instruct people on how to please Him. In the process needs may very well be met but the purpose of the church is not to meet people's needs (except for the need for godliness). In the modern church, needs reign; God exists to meet Harry's needs. Harry comes to Christ, not to glorify Him, but to find the promised fulfillment and happiness in this life. When Harry is attracted through a felt-need philosophy, he will not be retained when that approach is no longer used. In other words, if Harry is drawn to the church in order to *get*, in order to satisfy his flesh, he is not likely to stay around when and if he discovers that Christ calls for him to lose his life for Christ's sake (Matthew 16:25). The result is that churches which have been built on the quagmire of the superficial must remain superficial if they hope to retain their Harrys and Marys.

Summary

David Wells asked the right question of these seeker-sensitive churches, "Does the Church have the courage to become relevant by becoming biblical? Is it willing to break with the cultural habits of the time and propose something quite absurd, like recovering both the word and the meaning of sin?" (*Losing Our Virtue*, p. 199)? "I fear that the seeds of a full-blown liberalism have now been sown, and in the next generation they will surely come to maturity" (ibid., p. 205). I agree with the closing sentence in *Losing Our Virtue*, "We need the faith of the ages, not the reconstructions of a therapeutically driven or commercially inspired faith. And we need it, not least, because without it our postmodern world will become starved for the Word of God" (ibid., p. 209).

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