

Think on These Things

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The New Gospel,

A Look Behind the Scenes of the Market-Driven Church, Pt. 4

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Counterfeit money is recognized by those who know how to identify the real thing. Before we examine the gospel message found in the new paradigm churches, it would be best to examine the gospel message found in the Bible. The gospel message in a nutshell is this: Harry (to use Willow Creek's name for the unsaved) is a sinner, in full-blown rebellion against God (Rom. 3:23; 5:1-12). While some Harrys are outwardly religious and some even desire the gifts and benefits that God can supply, no Harrys truly seek after God or desire Him (Rom. 3:10-18). As a result of Harry's sinfulness he is under the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18), faces future judgment (Heb. 9:27), will die both physically and spiritually (Rom. 6:23) and will spend eternity in hell (Rev. 20:11-15).

It is because of Harry's hopeless plight, and the fact that he can do nothing to redeem himself in God's eyes (Titus 3:5), that Jesus Christ (through grace alone, not because of Harry's value and worth, Eph. 2:8) became a man, died on the cross (Rom. 5:8) (thus taking Harry's sin upon Himself and satisfying the wrath of God, Heb. 2:17) and resurrected from the dead in order that Harry could be saved from his sin and be given the righteousness of Christ (Rom 4). While all of this is a gift from God, Harry obtains that gift through the exercise of faith (Eph 2:8,9) – purely taking God at his word, trusting that God will save him if only he truly believes.

What I hope to demonstrate in this paper is that while many within the seeker-sensitive stable would ascribe to most of the above definition for the gospel, in reality, this is not how the gospel is being presented to Harry. Rather Harry is being told that he is so valuable to God that He sent His Son

to die for him (a denial of grace, cf. Hebrews 1-2 which lays out the case for God's grace through the unique method of showing that Christ did not die for angels who are of greater value than man, but he died for man – by grace alone). Harry is being told that if he will come to Christ, Christ will meet all of his felt needs and that will lead to personal fulfillment. Harry is then being asked to trust in Christ, the great "Needs-Meeter," who will end his search for a life of happiness and fulfillment.

This, I suggest, is not the gospel at all, but the "Gospel of Me", the "Gospel of Self-Fulfillment," the "New Gospel." "We must never confuse our desire for people to accept the Gospel," Oswald Chambers warned long ago, "with creating a Gospel that is acceptable to people." "How we define the problem will define our gospel. If the 'big problem' in the universe is my lack of self-esteem, the gospel will be 'finding the neat person inside of yourself.' If the great question is 'How can we fix society?' the gospel will be a set of moral agendas complete with a list of approved candidates. But how often do we discuss the 'big problem' as defined by Scripture? That problem is the wrath of God" (*The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, Edited by John Armstrong, "Recovering the Plumb Line," by Michael S. Horton, p. 256).

Harry Would Come to Church But...

The reason Unchurched Harry is unchurched is, to the market-driven proponents, a matter of Harry being a fallen creature who has rejected God and has little, if any attraction toward the things of God. Right? No, not at all. Rather, Harry would love to come to church, and ultimately

receive Christ, if only the church would learn to market and present its product better. Lee Strobel, former teaching pastor at Willow Creek, now with Saddleback Community, assures us that marketing studies have shown that "Harry has rejected church, but that doesn't necessarily mean he has rejected God" (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, p. 45). Yet, the Scriptures are very clear that mankind does reject God (Rom. 3:10-18; 5:1-12; I Cor. 1:18ff). What surveys show is that people have not rejected the gods of their own creation and imagination — but they do not seek the true God.

Actually what we learn, from marketing study, is that the real reason Harry doesn't come to church is because church is boring, predictable, irrelevant, money hungry (ibid. p. 80), and does not meet his needs (ibid. p. 58). The new paradigm church operates under the credo that Harry is "Hostile to the church, friendly to Jesus Christ" (ibid. p. 47). They "have the misconception that to win the world to Christ we must first win the world's favor. If we can get the world to like us, they will embrace our Savior. The expressed design of the user-friendly philosophy is to make unconverted sinners feel comfortable with the Christian message" (*Reckless Faith*, by John MacArthur, p. 52).

Reaching Harry with the Gospel

It is clear, when one studies Scripture rather than marketing surveys, that the seeker-sensitive church's gospel message is flawed at its roots — it has a faulty anthropology. It views Harry as attracted, even friendly with God, but turned off by the out-dated methods of the church. Once that premise is accepted the methodologies of the user-friendly church are logical. All that remains is to discover what Harry wants in a church, and in a God, and give it to him in an attractive package. In other words, make him an offer he can't refuse. On the negative side we must understand that "Unchurched Harry doesn't respond well to someone who predicates a command on, 'Thus sayeth the Lord'" (ibid. p. 50). Nor is the way to Harry's heart through the porthole of truth. For, you see, Harry is a pragmatist; his question is does Christianity work (ibid. p. 56)? Harry is also an existentialist; "Experience — not evidence — is their mode of discovery" (ibid. p. 59).

Now that we know that Harry is not motivated by the commands of God, nor is he all that interested in truth, we can abandon the direct approach. And since he is looking

for something that will help him reach his goals in life and to feel good in the process, we are ready to package the gospel to draw his attention. The new paradigm church does this by focusing on the gospel of felt need. "The Church's problem today is simply that it does not believe that, without tinkering, the Gospel will be all that interesting to modern people" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 207). And so tinker it must.

The Gospel of Felt Need

From psychology the seeker-sensitive church has discovered that both baby boomers and busters have — Learned to expect that their needs should be met, jobs would be provided, money would be available, and problems would be solved. The result is a generation of young adults who want and expect everything right away. Life is to be lived for the present. There is little awareness of a philosophy that says we should make long-range plans, or work hard today so things will be better tomorrow. This is a 'now' generation that has little interest in any religion that talks about sacrifices, heaven, or 'the sweet by-and-by.' They want to hear about a faith that works now and brings immediate results (Strobel, p. 57).

If this is true, how are we to proclaim the gospel to a pampered, self-centered generation that demands society meet their every whim? Previous generations, including biblical ones, would use these traits to point to evidence of sin in Harry's life. They would call Harry to repentance from such a lifestyle, and to faith in Christ for forgiveness of such sins. Then they would challenge new-believer Larry to abandon his self-centeredness, call for a life of self-sacrifice, humbly allowing the Spirit of God to transform him into Christlikeness.

But the modern church sees it differently. Strobel writes, "Our challenge, then, is to help this new generation of Unchurched Harry's understand that Christianity does work, that is, that the God of the Bible offers us supernatural wisdom and assistance in our struggles, difficulties, and recovery from past hurts" (ibid.). Strobel is suggesting that "this new generation" is unlike the past generations, and therefore must be reached differently than the past. What worked at one time simply does not speak to today's Harry.

Wells has nailed down the prevailing attitude when he writes, "What our culture suggests is that all of the greatest treasures of life are at hand, quite simply, in the self. Religious man was born to be saved, but psychological man was born to be pleased. 'I believe' has been replaced by 'I feel.' The problem is that we have not been feeling so well recently" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 107).

There is just enough truth in Strobel's statement to throw most of us off guard. Does Christianity work? Does God offer wisdom and help during times of struggle? Certainly, but is this the gospel? Is the good news that Christ died for our sins in order to free us from the wrath of God and give us the righteousness of Christ; or is the good news that Christ died in order that we might feel better about ourselves and have our felt needs met? These are two separate gospels.

A few more quotes from Strobel's book will help identify exactly what the new paradigm church is offering the unbeliever. "We baby boomers aren't coming to church to become members," said one pastor, himself a boomer. "We are coming to *experience* something. Yes, even to *get* something" (Strobel, p. 71 — emphasis in the original). What is it that Harry wants to experience? Strobel supplies some examples. "If you discover that unchurched Harry suffers from a sagging self-esteem... you can tell him how your own self-esteem has soared ever since you learned how much you matter to God" (ibid. p. 92). Never mind that the concept of self-esteem is foreign to Scripture, even anti-scriptural; never mind that the real issue that Harry struggles with, according to the Bible, is pride not low self-esteem; the gospel is now gift-wrapped to offer Harry what he has been conditioned to believe he needs.

Not everybody is in need of an ego boost however; some are looking for thrills, excitement, and adventure. Fortunately for the quick-minded evangelist the gospel resembles a chameleon, taking whatever shade is needed. Strobel assures such thrill-seekers that he "learned that there is nothing more exciting, more challenging, and more adventure-packed than living as a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. What I found is that there's a big difference, between *thrills* and *thrills that fulfill*" (ibid. p. 124 — emphasis in the original).

So now Jesus Christ can be offered as the big thrill, the ultimate in excitement. Not only is this a misrepresentation of Christ but it just does not square with

the facts. I wonder how thrilled the saints described in Hebrews 11:36-38 were as they were mocked, beaten, put to death, became homeless and lived in holes in the ground. The new paradigm church is offering a purely Americanized, yuppie brand of Christianity found nowhere in the New Testament. "Much of the Gospel presented today befits less the God of the ages than a fairy Godmother — offering people by God's hand what they've been unable to achieve for themselves: wealth, fame, comfort, and security" (Wayne Jacobsen as quoted from *Leadership*, Vol. IV, #1, p. 50).

The Gospel of Fulfillment

G. A. Pritchard, after spending a year studying the ministry at Willow Creek, eventually came to the conclusion that "Hybels' believes that Harry's most important concern is for his personal fulfillment.... Hybels teaches that Christianity will satisfy Harry's felt needs and provide fulfillment.... Hybels and the other speakers do not condemn the search for fulfillment. Rather they argue that Harry has not searched in the right place. The question remains the same, but the answer has been changed. Harry asks, 'How can I be happy?' 'Accept Jesus, answers Hybels'" (*Willow Creek Seeker Services* by G. A. Pritchard, p. 250). Pritchard's analysis is on the money,

Is Willow Creek correct in their teaching that a relationship with Christ will provide a life of fulfillment? In a word, no.... Personal fulfillment is the dominant goal of the vast majority of Americans. In this context it is a great temptation for American evangelicals to argue that Christianity is a means to fulfillment and the church becomes another place that promises to satisfy emotional desires.... To argue for Christianity primarily by pointing to its usefulness in satisfying felt needs is to ultimately undercut it. To teach Christianity as a means eventually teaches that it is superfluous. If someone is able to satisfy his or her felt needs without Christ, the message of Christianity can be discarded.... The bottom line why individuals should repent and worship God is because God deserves it. Fulfillment theology does not reflect the teaching of the Bible. We find in Scripture vast evidence that Christianity is often not "fulfilling," Jesus promises his disciples that "in this world you

will have trouble."... The Lord did not promise fulfillment, or even relief, in this world, but only in the next... . Fulfillment is not a spiritual birthright of Christians. The goal of a Christian's life is faithfulness, not fulfillment (Pritchard, p. 254-256).

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, attempting to examine modern Christianity, "suggests that in contemporary America, God has been molded to satisfy people's needs.... God is relevant to contemporary Americans mainly because the sense of God's presence is subjectively comforting; that is, religion solves personal problems rather than addressing broader questions" (As quoted in Pritchard, p. 260). Hybels has caught this wave and presents a sanguine portrayal of God to unchurched Harry that could be summarized, "God loves you and will meet you where you are, forgive you, and meet your felt needs and make you fulfilled" (Pritchard, p. 260). John MacArthur comments, "Marketing savvy demands that the offense of the cross must be downplayed. Salesmanship requires that negative subjects like divine wrath be avoided. Consumer satisfaction means that the standard of righteousness cannot be raised too high. The seeds of a watered-down gospel are thus sown in the very philosophy that drives many ministries today" (*Ashamed of the Gospel*, by John MacArthur, p. 24).

Summary

In response to those who object to the new gospel Strobel counters that "these objections generally relate to the method that's used to communicate the Gospel, not the message itself, and consequently we're free to use our God-given creativity to present Christ's message in new ways that our target audience will connect with" (Strobel, p. 168). This is simply not the case. While some of the methods may disturb us it is their message that is of real concern. The new paradigm church would loudly proclaim that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But they have redefined salvation. Salvation is not simply, under the new gospel, the forgiveness of sin and the imputation of righteousness. It is not a deliverance from the wrath of God upon a deserving and rebellious people.

The new gospel is a liberation from low self-esteem, a freedom from emptiness and loneliness, a means of fulfillment and excitement, a way to receive your heart's desires, a means of meeting our needs. The old gospel was

about God; the new gospel is about us. The old gospel was about sin; the new gospel is about needs. The old gospel was about our need for righteousness; the new gospel is about our need for fulfillment. The old gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing; the new gospel is attractive. Many are flocking to the new gospel but it is altogether questionable how many are actually being saved. In a moment of reflection on the validity of the methods used at Willow Creek Hybels himself asked the audience, "How many of us have been vaccinated with a mild case of Christianity? How many among us have the real disease" (as quoted by Pritchard, p. 316)?

"Nothing in Scripture indicates the church should lure people to Christ by presenting Christianity as an attractive option.... The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (I Cor. 1:18). There is no way to make it otherwise and be faithful to the message.... The gospel itself is disagreeable, unattractive, repulsive, and alarming to the world. It exposes sin, condemns pride, convicts the unbelieving heart, and shows human righteousness – even the best, most appealing aspects of human nature – to be worthless, defiled, filthy rags (cf. Isa. 64:6)" (MacArthur, pp. 72, 111, 128).

Spurgeon warned his day that, "When the old faith is gone, and enthusiasm for the gospel is extinct, it is no wonder that people seek something else in the way of delight. Lacking bread, they feed on ashes; rejecting the way of the Lord, they run greedily in the path of folly" (As quoted in *Ashamed of the Gospel*, by John MacArthur, p. 67).

We are forced to ask, with Peter Jennings in the thought-provoking video, *In the Name of God*, "As these churches try to attract sell-out crowds are they in danger of selling out the gospel?" Worthy question. Rather than winning the lost for Christ the truth is closer to Well's assessment, "The church is losing its voice. It should be speaking powerfully to the brokenness of life in this postmodern world and applying the balm of truth to wounds that are fresh and open, but it is not. It is adrift" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 207).

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