

The Gospel According to Hybels & Warren

(By Nathan Busenitz)

Copyright 2003, [Pulpit - Shepherds' Fellowship](http://www.pulpit-shepherds.org). All Rights Reserved.

For more information about Shepherds' Fellowship and how to join go to: www.gracechurch.org/sfellowship/

INTRODUCTION

Preliminary Considerations

The numbers are certainly impressive, the buildings expensive, and the congregations expansive. And there is plenty of reason to be enthusiastic—lost people are attending weekend services, the "unchurched" are being reached, and auditoriums once empty are being filled. But does the evangelistic philosophy behind the so-called "Church Growth Movement" (hereafter CGM) match up to the biblical model? Does it meet Scripture's standards or does it fall short of God's expectations?

These are certainly important questions, from both an ecclesiological and a soteriological point-of-view. After all, "the church growth movement is extraordinarily influential and significant within American churches today."¹ But is the soteriology that undergirds CGM correct? If so, it should be wholeheartedly embraced by pastors and congregations worldwide; if not, Christian leaders must be warned, lest they unwittingly guide their flocks into both theological and methodological disaster.

The Setting of Seeker-Sensitivity

While there is no controversy over the fact that CGM has added numbers to church attendance,² contemporary evangelicals are divided over its validity and appropriateness. Started primarily as a missiological movement,

*"Church Growth is that science that investigates the planting, multiplication, growth, function, health, and death of churches. It strives to apply the Biblical and social principles in its gathering, analysis, displaying, and defending of the facts involved in implementing the great commission. The heart of the Church Growth movement involves research into growth to establish principles to guide others in the harvest."*³

Inherently pragmatic in its approach, CGM follows the innovative techniques of its founding father, Donald McGavran (of Fuller Seminary), who in turn borrowed the techniques of Charles Finney.⁴

CGM, in its contemporary form, began as an international phenomenon as the product of American missions. It soon made its way back to the United States, however, using new names and new terms—one of which is "seeker-sensitive" or "seeker-friendly."⁵ Like its foreign counterparts, the American CGM focused on pragmatic means by which to influence the lost with the gospel. C. Peter Wagner, a leading proponent of CGM, says this:

*"The Church Growth Movement has always stressed pragmatism, and still does even though many have criticized it. It is not the kind of pragmatism that compromises doctrine or ethics or the kind that dehumanizes people by using them as means toward an end. It is, however, the kind of consecrated pragmatism which ruthlessly examines traditional methodologies and programs asking the tough questions. If some sort of ministry in the church is not reaching intended goals, consecrated pragmatism says there is something wrong which needs to be corrected."*⁶

As a clone of CGM, the American seeker-sensitive movement tries to balance the commands of Scripture on the one hand and the demands of pragmatism on the other.

Purpose, Scope, and Procedure of This Study

Two openly seeker-sensitive churches include Willow Creek Community Church, near Chicago, and Saddleback Valley Community Church, near Los Angeles. Both churches are considered part of CGM,⁷ both unabashedly purport a seeker-sensitive philosophy of ministry, and both have been very influential in evangelical ecclesiology.

The perceived success of these two ministries is, in no small sense, directly attributable to their founding pastors—the two men with whom this paper is primarily concerned. The first, Bill Hybels, is the senior pastor of Willow Creek—a church that "has been described as the undisputed prototype of a new way of doing church and as the most influential church in North America and perhaps the world."⁸ Since 1988, Willow Creek has sponsored numerous conferences around the globe with a total attendance of more than 50,000 individuals. Each year, Willow Creek sells more than 280,000 audio-tapes, and its church functions attract more than one million attendees.⁹

Rick Warren, the second individual of interest for this paper, is the founding pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church. His books *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life* have both done exceptionally well in terms of sales. *The Purpose-Driven Church*, for example, sold over one million copies in 20 different languages, and was selected as one of the "100 Christian Books that Changed the 20 th Century." Its supporters include men like W. A. Criswell, Bill Bright, Jerry Falwell, Robert Schuller, Adrian Rogers, and Jack Hayford. And the church that serves as its paradigm,

Saddleback Church, has grown from the house where it started (in 1980) to a weekly attendance of 16,000.

Because of the combined influence of these two men and the churches they lead, their evangelistic philosophies (which are essentially identical) warrant examination from a biblical perspective. Obviously, their approach has produced large numbers. The question this paper is concerned with, however, is have they done so in a biblical manner. This study will attempt to answer that question by first investigating the evangelistic message of Hybels and Warren, and then investigating their evangelistic method. Along the way, in order to test what they espouse, their philosophical tenets will be compared with the teachings of Scripture (Cf. Acts 17:11).

THE EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE OF HYBELS AND WARREN

While many critics of the seeker-sensitive movement look only at its methodology, a proper understanding of its message is equally crucial. After all, if the content of the seeker-friendly gospel is incomplete, then the movement will never meet biblical criteria, no matter how orthodox its practice.

In examining the evangelistic message of Hybels and Warren, several observations quickly surface.

1. On Paper, They Have an Orthodox Gospel Message

While the outworking of their soteriology may be innovative and nontraditional, the content of their gospel message is surprisingly orthodox. Hence, Hybels summarizes the gospel like this:

I have made it a point to keep in mind a simple means of explaining the Gospel of Jesus. It begins with Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." None of us are able to meet God's standard of moral excellence; we are all sinners. The second step is Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The natural result of our sin is eternal death, or separation from God, but because of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross, God can offer us total forgiveness and eternal life. The last step is Romans 10:13, "For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved."¹⁰

He goes on to add, "We all have the tendency to avoid the sin issue. The message would be so much more comfortable without it. But, unless men and women are aware of their sin, they won't recognize their need for a Savior who offers eternal life to all who call on His name."¹¹

And again:

*Contagious churches have learned that they must communicate to their culture without compromising **with** their culture. They know that if the message of the cross of Christ is ever diluted or hidden, then the*

*battle has already been lost. What good is it to learn to speak the language of secular people if we lose our message in the process?*¹²

Rick Warren agrees, arguing that "The Good News is that when we trust God's grace to save us through what Jesus did, our sins are forgiven, we get a purpose for living, and we are promised a future home in heaven."¹³ He even goes so far as to assert that the inerrancy of Scripture is a "nonnegotiable belief."¹⁴

It is not surprising, then, to learn that,

*Seeker church pastors [including Hybels and Warren] hold evangelical theological positions on the Bible, the divinity of Christ, and the nature of—and the conditions for attaining— eternal life. They also hold a Reformed view on the depravity of human nature. [In fact,] most seeker church pastors claim that the Christian message must include some mention of Hell.*¹⁵

2. In Practice, They Deemphasize Certain Parts of Orthodox Theology

While the soteriological content of the seeker-sensitive message may be biblical, the gospel message actually proclaimed by Hybels and Warren often deemphasizes certain theological elements— choosing instead to only focus on those parts of the message that sound enticing to potential seekers. This of course fits with the pragmatic approach of CGM, which avoids "sticky" or unpopular theological issues whenever possible. McGarvan explains:

*From the beginning the Church Growth Movement has been rooted in biblical, evangelical, conversionist theology. But it has refused to take sides on issues such as whether baptism should be administered to infants or only to believers, whether churches should be governed by a Presbyterian, Episcopal, or congregational system, whether tongues proves that one has been baptized in the Holy Spirit, whether Christians should or should not drink, whether women should be ordained to the ministry, whether Christ is truly or symbolically present in holy communion, and on any number of other areas of disagreement among theologians.*¹⁶

Kimon Howland concurs, showing that seeker-sensitive churches (such as Willow Creek and Saddleback Church) 1) replace verse-by-verse exposition with messages that focus on the common needs of their audience,¹⁷ 2) downplay God's judgment, holiness, and righteousness,¹⁸ 3) focus almost exclusively on God's paternal love,¹⁹ 4) and try to make every sermon relevant to the felt needs of their audience.²⁰ Howland summarizes the situation this way:

In sum, seeker churches introduce seekers to the Christian message by presenting the exclusivist theology of evangelicalism in the friendly guise of an egalitarian, fulfillment-enhancing, fun religious encounter with God. As a result, seeker church pastors make orthodox theology less offensive and more civil for a pluralistic society. Seeker church proponents do not abandon the "Gospel truth" but

*repackage it in a kinder, gentler format. They maintain the evangelical emphasis on the importance of faith in Jesus Christ but subtly transform the reasons why one should pursue such faith. . . . The promise of this-worldly peace and fulfillment supplements, perhaps even supersedes, the eternal consequences of one's personal response to Christ.*²¹

Os Guinness agrees, noting, "When megachurch pastors seek to mold a message to their 'market' of constituent needs their preaching omits key components. Gone are the hard sayings of Jesus. Gone is the teaching on sin, self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, judgment, hell. With all its need-meeting emphases, there is little in the church-growth movement that stands crosswise to the world."²² Or, said another way:

*While seeker church pastors are adamantly committed to the basics of evangelical orthodoxy, they are also eager to present this message without giving any unnecessary offense. . . . Thus, seeker church advocates are committed to developing a nonconfrontational way of presenting the Gospel. Instead of railing about eternal damnation, Hybels explains in one of his seeker messages the consequences of rejecting God: "You'll miss the reward your heart yearns for, which is to be affirmed from the father who is in heaven. You don't want to miss His rewards. You don't want to miss His compensations, because they're rich. They're soul-satisfying."*²³

3. Their Premise Includes an Arminian Bent

At this point, a third observation must be briefly noted—namely the Arminian leanings of seeker-sensitive pastors. While the methodological implications of this thinking will be discussed later in this paper, it is important to realize that the leaders of seeker-sensitive churches (such as Hybels and Warren) view the gospel through Arminian lenses.²⁴ This Arminian tint allows the seeker-sensitive pastor to justify his pragmatic methodology, because the response of the seeker, to a large extent, depends on the presentation of the preacher. John MacArthur says it like this:

*The philosophy that marries marketing technique with church growth theory is the result of bad theology. It assumes that if you package the gospel right, people will get saved. It is rooted in Arminianism, which makes the human will, not a sovereign God, the decisive factor in salvation. It speaks of conversion as a "decision for Christ." Such language and such doctrine have begun to color modern ministry. The goal of market-driven ministry is an instantaneous human decision, rather than a radical transformation of the heart wrought by Almighty God through the Holy Spirit's convicting work and the truth of His Word. An honest belief in the sovereignty of God in salvation would bring an end to a lot of the nonsense that is going on in the church.*²⁵

4. Thus, Their Gospel Presentations Fall Short of the Biblical Model

In light of the seeker-sensitive spin he and Hybels put on their gospel presentations, Warren's claim that

"we may be innovative with the *style* of ministry, but we must never alter the *substance* of it"²⁶ falls flat. Throughout the New Testament, the hard sayings of the gospel are emphasized as much, if not more, than anything else. The message of John the Baptist emphasized repentance (Matt. 3:2) and coming judgment for sinners (Matt. 3:7). Jesus Himself commanded those who would follow Him to deny themselves (Luke 9:23-24), being willing to die for His sake as they chose to hate this world because of their love for Him (Matt. 10:37-39). For that matter, He spoke of hell more than He did of heaven,²⁷ calling those who refused to believe the "condemned" (John 3:18)— those who would spend eternity in the fiery furnace (Matt 13:42, 50) where the worm never dies (Mark 9:48). Paul too was also quick to point out the punishment unbelievers will face (2 Thess. 1:7-10), arguing that the unsaved are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-2), under God's wrath (Eph. 2:3), and subject to the control of sin and Satan (2 Tim. 2:26; Rom. 6:16-17). Certainly, these proclamations could not be labeled "seeker-friendly."

Neither Christ, nor His apostles, watered-down the message for the sake of cultural relevancy. In fact, in John 6, Jesus turned away a significant crowd of "seekers" because the message He preached was not what they wanted to hear. Paul, too, made it clear that his message was not governed by the felt needs of his audience, but rather the hard truth of the gospel (Gal. 1:10-12); as did James, arguing that the wisdom from above is "first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17).

Quite honestly, the evangelistic message of Hybels and Warren seems to more closely coincide with that of New Testament false teachers— tickling the ears of their audiences (2 Tim. 4:3), appealing to those who are "lovers of self (2 Tim. 3:2), denying in practice (through deemphasis) the doctrinal power of the gospel truth that they know (2 Tim. 3:5).²⁸

THE EVANGELISTIC METHOD OF HYBELS AND WARREN

Having examined the deficient content of the seeker-friendly message, this paper will now focus on the movement's evangelistic methodology. After all, this is the main emphasis of the movement itself— with minimal focus on doctrine and maximum focus on programming.²⁹ In so doing, this paper will examine six tenets of the seeker-sensitive method— giving both an explanation and evaluation of each seeker-friendly proposition. While these principles are certainly found in the writings of Hybels and Warren, it is important to note that they are primarily pragmatic principles, stemming more from the practice of seeker-sensitive preachers than from any formal doctrinal statement or creed.³⁰

1. The Assumption: Unbelievers are Seeking the Truth

a. Explanation. As the name of the movement suggests, the underlying presupposition of seeker-sensitive churches is that unbelievers are seeking the truth. In an age of consumerism, seekers have been offered numerous religious and ideological products— they are shoppers looking for the religious system with which they feel most compatible. Because the unchurched are seeking answers, Christians

must pitch Christianity in a way that will appeal to them— helping them to understand that Christianity is superior to any of the other products available.

If the pitch is good enough, seekers will choose Christianity, realizing that God was what they were looking for all along. Thus, Hybels says, "After studying the other options carefully, seeker after honest seeker comes to the conclusion that it takes more faith to deny Christianity than it does to embrace it."³¹ After all, "deep down they're looking for somebody— anybody— to step up and proclaim the truth."³² Warren agrees, devoting an entire chapter of *The Purpose Driven Church* to "Designing a Seeker-Sensitive Service,"³³ one in which skeptical seekers will be won over through the flash and flow of entertaining church programs. For both of these men the premise is simple: lost people are searching for God and the church should help them find Him.³⁴

b. Evaluation. In contrast, Scripture argues exactly the opposite— that no one is truly seeking after God. David, in Psalm 14:2-3 states is plainly: "The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one." (See also Psalm 53:2-3). Paul echoes these words in Romans 3:10-11: "There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God."

In Scripture, unbelievers are portrayed, not as those who earnestly seek God, but rather as the spiritually dead (Col. 2:13), the spiritually rebellious (Eph. 2:1-3), and the spiritually hardhearted (Eph. 4:18). Even though God's self-disclosure through nature and the conscience should cause men to seek Him (Acts 17:27-29), unbelievers have rejected the truth that they know, becoming "futile in their thoughts [so that] their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). With this in mind, John MacArthur comments: "The Lord knows that man's sinful inclination is *not* to seek Him, and He therefore seeks individuals to draw them to Himself."³⁵

The New Testament supports this assertion— namely, that sinners do not seek God but rather God seeks sinners. John 3:16 notes that salvation is available because "God loved the world," not because "the world sought God." Even Jesus stated that He came "to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Interestingly, the world did not seek Him in return, but rather rejected His claims, nailing Him to a cross. No wonder Christ warned His disciples: "All men will hate you because of Me" (Luke 21:17), and again: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first" (John 15:18).

In light of the New Testament evidence, only one conclusion can be drawn: "No one is righteous; in fact, no one understands his deplorable condition. And no one is even trying to understand, is even searching for God, the Source of all wisdom and knowledge."³⁶ John Murray agrees: "In the noetic sphere there is no understanding; in the conative there is no movement towards God. With reference to God all men are noetically blind and in respect of Godward aspiration they are dead."³⁷ In light of the biblical data, a movement entirely based on the concept of seekers seeking God is fundamentally flawed.

2. The Approach: Christians Need to Think Like Unbelievers.

a. Explanation. A second tenet of seeker-sensitive methodology is that believers need to think like unbelievers in order to reach the lost. To be effective, evangelists must begin by putting themselves in the shoes of the unchurched— purposefully making their messages relevant to the felt needs of the audience. Thus, Hybels has his "Unchurched Harry" and Warren his "Saddleback Sam"— names given to the typical individual who makes up the target audience of Willow Creek and Saddleback Church. Lee Strobel, formerly at Willow Creek, is now the teaching pastor of Saddleback. Regarding the church's target audience, he says this:

Once the bull's-eye of a target audience is defined, the next step is to determine how to get the arrow there. That means developing a workable strategy for reaching that group. . . . When [church members are] regularly hanging around Unchurched Harry and Mary, talking with them over dinner or going out to movies with them, they naturally get to know the kind of approach that will attract or repel them."³⁸

In other words, believers need to understand the felt needs of seekers if those seekers are to be effectively reached.

Warren echoes this strategy, telling his readers to:

Adapt your style to fit your audience. . . . The ground we have in common with unbelievers is not the Bible, but our common needs, hurts, and interests as human beings. You cannot start with a text, expecting the unchurched to be fascinated by it. You must first capture their attention, and then move them to the truth of God's Word. By starting with a topic that interests the unchurched and then showing what the Bible says about it, you can grab their attention, disarm prejudices, and create an interest in the Bible that wasn't there before."³⁹

And Hybels wholeheartedly agrees:

*If we're going to speak with integrity to secular men and women, we need to work through two critical areas before we step into the pulpit. The first is to **understand the way they think**. . . . The second prerequisite to effective preaching to non-Christians is that we **like them**."⁴⁰*

In other words, "successful fishing requires the ability to think like a fish."⁴¹

By understanding the specific demographic and psychographic backgrounds of those in the audience, preachers can better appeal to their felt needs— showing the lost that the gospel is relevant to their current life situation. Warren, in fact, is so confident in this strategy that he says, "It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. That key to each person's heart is unique so it is sometimes difficult to discover. It may take some time to identify it.

But the most likely place to start is with that person's felt needs."⁴²

b. Evaluation. Are demographic, psychographic, and geographic considerations the keys to evangelism? Is *thinking like an unbeliever* the way to effectively reach him or her? Is knowing what the unsaved audience wants to hear the biblical method for preaching the gospel? Even a brief survey of the biblical evidence quickly reveals cracks in this seeker-sensitive argument.

The early church, for example, clearly defied the "target audience" approach of the contemporary seeker church—having been built by the Spirit rather than statistics.

The collections of people who responded to the gospel and banded together in the first century defy much of modern market research and ideas about church growth. Modern thinking holds that groups of people with similar sociological backgrounds ("homogeneous" groups) grow more quickly than ones with different backgrounds ("heterogeneous") because like attracts like. Therefore, churches should target people of the same race, demographic profile, socioeconomic status, and so forth.

But the untidy collection of Acts believers seems to contradict that model. Churches sprouted up spontaneously in response to God's grace more than through social marketing.⁴³

Moreover, Scripture never commands Christians to think like the unsaved, but rather commands exactly the opposite. Paul simply says "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart" (Eph. 4:17-18). In other words, Christians are to stop thinking like unbelievers. In Romans 8:6-7, he puts it even more bluntly, "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." In fact, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers" (2 Cor. 4:4). In light of this, believers are to avoid conformity with the world, allowing their minds to be transformed by God's truth (Rom. 12:2), preparing their minds for action (1 Pet. 1:13)—putting off the deeds and thoughts of the flesh (Eph. 4:22-24).

Finally, the idea that anyone can lead anyone else to Christ, simply by unlocking the felt needs of the heart, is an arrogant assumption at best. Only God has the ability to even know the heart (Jer. 17:9-10; Rev. 2:23), let alone change it. It is His Spirit who cleanses the heart (Titus 3:5); it is His Word that penetrates through layers of doubt and unbelief (Heb. 4:12); He is the one who calls sinners to Himself (Rom. 8:29-30)—having specifically chosen them before time began (Eph. 1:3-6). And while men are certainly His agents for preaching the gospel (Rom. 10:14-15), God is nonetheless sovereign in the entire process (Rom. 9:18).

In the end, the seeker model is really nothing more than a recipe for compromise. By asking the church to think like the world, seeker churches are filling their membership rosters with worldly Christians. As one writer put it, "Scripture and history are also clear: Without maintaining critical tension, the principle

of identification is a recipe for compromise and capitulation. It is no accident that the charge of being 'all things to all people' has become a popular synonym for compromise."⁴⁴ In reaching out to the world, Hybels and Warren run the risk of becoming like those they are trying to reach.

3. The Appeal: Evangelists Must Entertain and Persuade

a. Explanation. A third tenet of seeker-sensitive methodology is its emphasis on entertainment and persuasion. In other words, gospel preachers are encouraged to tell numerous stories and jokes, keep messages short, avoid deep theological issues, and supplement their sermons with drama and music. In fact, the goal of a seeker-friendly pastor should be to draw a crowd; after all, "a crowd is not a church. But to grow a larger church you must first attract a crowd."⁴⁵ In light of this overemphasis on entertainment, Lawson's description seems fitting:

A new way of "doing" church is emerging. In this radical paradigm shift, exposition is being replaced with entertainment, preaching with performances, doctrine with drama, and theology with theatrics. The pulpit, once the focal point of the church, is now being overshadowed by a variety of church-growth techniques, everything from trendy worship styles to glitzy presentations to vaudeville-like pageantries. In seeking to capture the upperhand in church growth, a new wave of pastors is reinventing church and repackaging the gospel into a product to be sold to "consumers."

Whatever reportedly works in one church is being franchised out to various "markets" abroad. As when gold was discovered in the foothills of California, so ministers are beating a path to the doorsteps of exploding churches and super-hyped conferences where the latest "strike" has been reported. Unfortunately the newly panned gold often turns out to be "fool's gold." Not all that glitters is actually gold.⁴⁶

With similar sobriety, Guinness asks, "What of the megachurches' subordination of worship and discipleship to evangelism, and all three to entertainment, a problem that is already the Achilles' heel of evangelicalism?"⁴⁷ And Howland's straightforward prognosis does not offer much comfort: "The principle underlying innovative seeker messages is that the Gospel must be presented in a civil and inviting [i. e. interesting and entertaining] manner so that it will appeal to today's geographically mobile, well-educated seekers. . . . Thus, seeker church pastors aim to present relevant messages every weekend."⁴⁸ Simply put, evangelists must be able to entertain their audience if they ever hope to persuade those in attendance to accept the Christian invitation.

Hybels and Warren could not agree more. For instance, Hybels states, "Unchurched people today are the ultimate consumers. We may not like it, but for every sermon we preach, they're asking, *Am I interested in that subject or not?* If they aren't, it doesn't matter how effective our delivery is; their minds will check out."⁴⁹ Warren is even more direct. He says,

I've heard pastors proudly say, "We're not here to entertain." Obviously they're doing a good job at it. A

*Gallup poll a few years ago stated that, according to the unchurched, the church is the most boring place to be. . . . To the unchurched, dull preaching is unforgivable. Truth poorly delivered is ignored. On the other hand, the unchurched will listen to absolute foolishness if it is interesting. . . . When God's Word is taught in an uninteresting way, people don't just think the pastor is boring, they think God is boring!*⁵⁰

Thus, the evangelistic message must be interesting, exciting, and relevant if it is to be effective.

This type of effective evangelistic preaching is, according to Hybels and Warren, accomplished in several different ways. First, the evangelist should be a story-teller, using illustrations and anecdotes to communicate spiritual truth without being intimidating. "Jesus captured the interest of large crowds with techniques that you and I can use," they argue. "First, he told stories to make a point. Jesus was a master storyteller. . . . Somehow preachers forget that the Bible is essentially a book of stories."⁵¹ Second, evangelists must be able to communicate clearly— using vocabulary that is free of Christian lingo and theological jargon.⁵² With this in mind, Warren contends that "most people communicate with a vocabulary of less than 2,000 words and rely on only about 900 words in daily use. If you want to communicate with most people you need to keep it simple."⁵³ Third, evangelists must focus on the practical, felt needs of their audience. In fact, "what attracts so many people to seeker services across the country is the seeker service emphasis on how God makes the lives of Christians more fulfilling."⁵⁴ Armed with these three basics, complemented by a comfortable and affirming environment, seeker-sensitive pastors are confident that if they pitch the gospel right they can consistently "close the sale."⁵⁵

As one might expect, the resulting preaching is light and fluffy— designed to go down easy. . . to taste great and be less filling. Yet, Hybels and Warren insist that their model is not only "not pandering to consumerism,"⁵⁶ but is in fact the very model Jesus used. Warren says this:

*What attracted large crowds to Jesus' ministry? Jesus did three things with crowds: He loved them (Matt. 9:36, et al.), he met their needs (Matt. 15:30; Luke 6:17-18; John 6:2; et al.), and he taught them in interesting and practical ways (Matt. 13:34; Mark 10:1; 12:37; et al.). These same three ingredients will attract crowds today. . . . To capture the attention of unbelievers like Jesus did, we must communicate spiritual truth the way he did. Jesus, not anyone else, must be our model for preaching.*⁵⁷

Of course, Warren recognizes that there are critics of his entertainment-oriented, highly pragmatic method of gospel communication. Nevertheless, he responds with this rebuttal:

Some pastors criticize "life-application" [i. e. entertaining and felt needs oriented] preaching as shallow, simplistic, and inferior. To them, the only real preaching is didactic, doctrinal preaching. This attitude implies that Paul was more profound than Jesus, that Romans is "deeper" material than the Sermon on the Mount or the parables. I call that heresy!⁵⁸

In other words, since Jesus told stories we should too.

b. Evaluation. But what was the purpose of Jesus' stories? Was it primarily to entertain His audience, so as to build a crowd from which He might draw converts? Interestingly, the disciples asked Jesus why He taught using parables in Matthew 13:10. But Jesus' answer is not what the seeker-sensitive model might lead one to expect. Any hint of entertainment is nowhere to be found in His response. Rather, His motive for using stories was so that spiritual truth might be hidden from those to whom God had not chosen to reveal it (see vv. 11-17). In fact, Mark 4:34 notes that Christ had to explain the stories He told to His disciples in private, so that they could fully understand them. Matthew 13:35 adds a second reason Jesus spoke in parables—to fulfill prophecy (see Ps. 78:2). Yet, Scripture never indicates that the purpose behind His stories was founded in entertainment or in an attempt to please the crowd. For that matter, in John 6 when Christ had just attracted a large crowd, He rebuked them because they only followed Him for the novelty of a supernatural free-lunch (vv. 26-27). Moreover, His non-seeker-friendly message (in vv. 53-58) ended up driving the crowd away (v. 66).⁵⁹

Like Christ, entertainment was also not the primary goal of the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, he told the church at Corinth: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, *not in cleverness of speech*, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void" (emphasis added). Second Corinthians 2:1-5 echoes the same:

*And when I came to you, brethren, **I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom**, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and **my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom**, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (Emphasis added.)*

While there are many who wanted their ears tickled (2 Tim. 4:3), Paul's concern was not on eloquence but rather faithfulness. This is not to say that good communication skills are not valuable, but rather to say that they are a distant second when compared to the integrity of the message.

In light of this, James Heidinger issues this warning to all who would faithfully preach the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Evangelical pastors and theologians can learn from the mainline experience of placing relevance above truth. We must avoid the lure of novelty and soft sell, which, we are told, will make it easier for moderns to believe. Methods may change, but never the message. . . . We are called to be faithful stewards of a great and reliable theological heritage. We have truths to affirm and errors to avoid. We must not try to make these truths more appealing or user friendly by watering them down. We must guard against a trendy "theological bungee-jumping" that merely entertains the watching crowd.⁶⁰

4. The Authority: Messages Should Be Governed by Felt Needs

a. Explanation: Along with an entertainment-oriented presentation, a fourth tenet of seeker-sensitive evangelism is that highest priority should be placed on the felt needs of the audience. After all, "people are looking for someone . . . to meet their needs *as defined and prioritized by them.*"⁶¹ And seeker-seeking churches are eager to assist. As a result, the target audience (made up of lost individuals) becomes the group around which everything else revolves. In practice, unsaved attendees become the church's authority, rather than the Word of God. George Barna, a well-known CGM strategist and supporter of both Hybels and Warren, has even gone so far as to say:

*It is . . . critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: **the audience, not the message, is sovereign.** If our advertising is going to stop people in the midst of hectic schedules and cause them to think about what we're saying, our message has to be adapted to the needs of the audience.*⁶²

Hybels and Warren also place a high priority on the seeker, looking to his or her felt needs for guidance in their ministry. For instance, comparing the church to a business, Hybels contends:

Businesses, if they're going to be successful for the long haul, must pull their attention off of themselves and refocus their energies on their only reason for existence—to serve their customers. . . . It's not hard to see that both the problems and solutions of the business world have close cousins within the Christian community. We can get so easily entangled and ensnared in the internal issues, questions, and personal situations in our churches that the primary reason we remain on this planet is to reach the people "out there." Just like commercial organizations need to get their focus off themselves, we as individual Christians and collective churches need to recalibrate our sights on the target God has given us: spiritually lost people.⁶³

And Warren's argument is essentially the same. "Remember whom you are serving," he says. "The only non-negotiable elements of a seeker service are to treat unbelievers with love and respect, relate the service to their needs, and share the message in a practical, understandable manner."⁶⁴ In another place, he argues that "the Bible determines our message, but our target determines when, where, and how we communicate it."⁶⁵ In fact, according to Warren, "Jesus often met a felt need in order to establish a beachhead for evangelism in a person's life."⁶⁶ The clear implication is that the reader should do the same.

"You can tell that a church values lost people by the way it sets priorities and makes decisions," argues Hybels.⁶⁷ One such priority is the message itself, which should focus on the perceived needs of the audience. Warren explains,

One reason sermon study is so difficult for many pastors is because they ask the wrong question. Instead of asking, "What shall I preach on this Sunday?" they should be asking, "To whom will I be preaching?" Simply thinking through the needs of the audience will help determine God's will for the message. . . . People's immediate needs are a key to where God would have you begin speaking on that particular

In defense of this method, Warren argues that although "preaching to felt needs is scorned and criticized in some circles as a cheapening of the Gospel and a sellout to consumerism, . . . 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!*"⁶⁹

b. Evaluation. Both Warren and Hybels are, of course, quick to assure their readers that, despite their focus on felt needs, the message itself remains intact. In practice, however, these claims do not accurately reflect reality. Os Guinness explains, "For Christians the most important impact of marketing is always on the message itself. . . . After all, when the audience and not the message is sovereign, the good news of Jesus Christ is no longer the end, but just the means."⁷⁰ By concentrating on felt needs, the message is necessarily changed— because its focus is changed.

The question, therefore, naturally arises— are the audience's felt needs a legitimate focus during evangelistic presentations? Should they be the authority in the church's evangelistic model? The evidence from God's Word clearly gives a negative answer to these questions. Obviously, the audience is taken into account (consider Paul on Mars Hill in Acts 17). Yet, the felt needs of the audience are never given first place. Rather, faithfulness to the message (and to the Giver of that message) is always what is most important. Thus, Paul tells Timothy that while people will one day exchange sound doctrine for entertainment, accumulating "for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires," Timothy is to preach the Word without compromise (2 Tim. 4:2-3). Likewise, Titus is to rebuke the lazy and gluttonous Cretans (who were clearly ruled by their felt needs), reproving them with right doctrine that they might be "sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13). More directly, Paul makes it clear that in his evangelistic endeavors, his goal was not to please men but rather to please God (Gal. 1:10). After all, he received his message and his commission from Christ Himself (Gal. 1:12; Titus 1:1). Paul's focus, therefore, was on serving his Lord and bringing Him glory— Christ was his highest priority. When it came to evangelism, Paul (and the other apostles— cf. Peter in Acts 2 and 4) concentrated on meeting the real needs of their audience (namely, the sinner's need for salvation), rather than focusing on their superficial felt needs.

So what can be said about the seeker-sensitive over-emphasis on the felt needs of their audience? Guinness gives us this answer:

In short, the exaggerated half-truth about the church's "needing to meet needs" once again breeds unintended consequences. Just as church-growth's modern passion for "relevance" will become its road to irrelevance, so its modern passion for "felt needs" will turn the church into an echo chamber of fashionable needs that drown out the one voice that addresses real human need below all felt needs [namely, God's Word].⁷¹

5. The Atmosphere: Churches Should Hold Seeker Services

A fifth element of seeker-sensitive methodology concerns atmosphere, with two unique aspects being involved. First, seeker services are to take place in the church, usually on the weekend at a time most convenient for potential attendees. Seekers are made to feel comfortable and allowed to remain anonymous for the entire service. Second, through drama, stories, and especially through music, seekers are made emotionally ready to accept the message they are about to hear. In all of this, the evangelist must be very purposeful, careful to choose the right meeting time, the right stories, the right skits, and the right music so as to create the intended result in his audience. As Warren says, "If you don't purposely determine the type of atmosphere you want to create in a service, you are leaving it to chance."⁷²

Bill Hybels agrees with Warren. Regarding the way in which Willow Creek purposely planned its seeker services, he says:

*We've designed our weekend services to sensitively address the issues people face when they're investigating the Christian faith. We also let them know they won't be asked to sign, sign, say, or give anything while they're in their search phase. This allows them the opportunity they need to adequately honor Jesus' command to "count the cost" of following Him before they actually sign on the dotted line.*⁷³

The goal of each seeker service, of course, "is not merely to tell people about Christ. That's just the process we use to reach the goal, which is to lead people to Christ."⁷⁴ In order to reach this goal, sometimes the church must use "unconventional approaches," approaches which, although unorthodox, "are essential to God's redemptive efforts."⁷⁵

Warren adds this regarding the church's seeker service:

*Making a service "comfortable" for the unchurched doesn't mean changing your theology, it means changing the environment of the service. Changing the environment could be done through the way you greet visitors, the style of music you use, the Bible translation you preach from, and the kinds of announcements you make in the service. . . . Being seeker sensitive does not limit what you say, but it does affect **how you say it.***⁷⁶

Music, for example, must be a major component of the seeker-oriented church service, and it should match the church's target audience. Warren, who devotes an entire chapter to the topic in *The Purpose Driven Church*, advises pastors to "match your music to the kind of people God wants your church to reach. . . . There is no such thing as 'Christian music.' There are only Christian lyrics."⁷⁷ This music should be excellent, entertaining, compelling, and fresh. Old hymns and overused choruses should be discarded for contemporary songs that are sure to have an emotional impact. After all, "every true revival has always been accompanied by new music."⁷⁸

Throughout the service, making the seekers feel comfortable is key. Warren explains, "We do not expect unbelieving attenders to get rid of their sinful habits or change their lifestyle in order to attend a service. Instead, they're encouraged to come 'just as they are.' The church is a hospital for sinners."⁷⁹ Thus, while seeker-sensitive pastors encourage their members to witness outside of church,⁸⁰ in practice most of their evangelism occurs during the weekend seeker services—services that are purposely designed to make sinners feel comfortable while emotionally preparing them for the message they are about to hear.

b. Evaluation. But is the purpose of the church (as it meets in its weekly assembly) to evangelize the lost? Or is it rather, to edify the saints (Heb. 10:25) so that they might be better equipped to witness as they "go" through their life context (Matt. 28:19-20)? Ronald Runyon responds to these questions with the following:

Some church growth experts contend that evangelism ("disciple-making" is their term) is most effective when it is church-centered.

The more distant evangelism is from the local church, the less "fruit" that remains; the closer evangelism is to the local church, the more "fruit" that remains. An effective strategy for disciple-making revolves around the local church.... The process of disciple-making has the church at the center of the evangelistic focus. . . .

The author's disagreement with this philosophy is based on the examples of the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Christians are to meet and engage people where they are (out in the world) and not wait for them to come to a church meeting.⁸¹

Dr. Steve Lawson agrees:

*The apostles' teaching was designed to nourish the faith of new believers. Those who "were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" ("they," 2:42) were also those who had previously received Peter's word unto salvation and were baptized (v. 41). All who believed were baptized and added to the fellowship of believers also welcomed the apostles' teaching. In other words all the **believers** were continually coming to the apostles to be instructed in God's truth. These first gatherings of the church were designed primarily for edifying believers, not for evangelizing unbelievers. Of course they were reaching out to the unsaved, for "the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (v. 47). But this "evangelism explosion" was the **result** of their teaching, not the stated **purpose** of it. They gathered for edification; they scattered for evangelism. The primary focus of their corporate worship gatherings was for building up the believers, not for reaching seekers. When this priority becomes reversed and the church meets primarily to save the lost, the apostles' teaching soon becomes compromised and diluted.⁸²*

The biblical data, then, emphasizes body life within the church (1 Cor. 12-14), as believers exercise their spiritual gifts in the local church context (Rom. 12:3-8). The evidence does not encourage, or even imply, that weekly church services should be primarily evangelistic. Moreover, the New Testament even

mention the importance of music in the church (with possible exception to Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16). Once again, seeker-sensitive leaders like Hybels and Warren are primarily basing their methodology on what attracts unbelievers, not on what is inherently biblical.

6. The Assessment: Success Equals Numeric Results

Explanation. A final aspect of seeker-sensitive evangelism regards its self-assessment. Armed with a "big business" mentality, seeker-sensitive churches evaluate their evangelistic practices primarily on the basis of what is numerically successful. In other words, evangelistic programs and methodologies are assessed primarily by whether or not they "work"— whether or not they can draw a crowd and keep that crowd coming back. Thus, Warren says,

*I always refuse to debate which method of evangelism works best. It depends on who you are trying to reach! Different kinds of bait catch different kinds of fish. I'm in favor of any method that reaches at least one person for Christ— as long as it is ethical. I think it will be very embarrassing someday when critics of a particular method of evangelism get to heaven and discover all the people who are there because of it! We should never criticize any method that God is blessing.*⁸³

Warren, of course, interprets God's blessing in terms of numbers, a conclusion that is perfectly consistent with CGM.

*Today the term **church growth** is used almost exclusively to mean numerical growth. If the numbers go up, the church is growing. If the numbers stay the same, the church is experiencing a "plateau," a buzz word for stagnation. If the numbers are going down, the church must be unhealthy and in a state of decline.*⁸⁴

Howland concurs, noting that, "Pastors evaluate seeker messages according to their 'market value: ' Do they work? Do they persuade 'Unchurched Harry'?"⁸⁵ And Stadelmann gives this helpful insight:

*Some, very pragmatically, would say: **success is this norm!** If something works, it is all right. If a theory causes activities to be more effective and thus proves to be successful, it is easily judged to be exactly what churches need. G. A. Pritchard, in his sympathetic-critical study of the concept of the Willow Creek Community Church, shows how in the early years of this successful church it was somewhat influenced by Robert Schuller's marketing approach to church growth: in order to "sell" the Christian "product" you have to find out what would impress the non-churched people in your community; if you manage to adapt the "product" to the felt needs of the people, your church will grow successfully. Pritchard does not say that Willow Creek has fully taken over this principle, but he analyzes how, in certain aspects, the success-oriented marketing principle has had its influence on the form and content of this famous and, in many respects, exemplary church's ministry. He challenges the church-growth-movement to give theological criteria preference over against success-oriented marketing principles.*⁸⁶

Hence, for both Willow Creek and Saddleback Church, as with the whole of CGM, numbers are the primary standard of success. If church attendance is growing, its methodology must be right. If church attendance is not growing, something must be wrong.

b. Evaluation. Once again, the seeker-sensitive movement misses the mark, being led by men "who elevate numerical growth over spiritual growth and who believe they can induce that numerical growth by following whatever techniques seem to be working at the moment."⁸⁷ Instead they ought to be focused on a biblical standard of success—namely approval from the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4; Cf. Matt. 25:21-23; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; Rom. 14:10; 2 Tim. 4:7-8).

*Several biblical texts affirm that leaders ought not count numbers. Of course no one wants a gravel-road church in an interstate world, but at no point do the Scriptures give any warrant for measuring health on the basis of size alone. The early chapters of Acts record that some large numbers of people came to Christ. Then Luke never again mentioned the size of any congregation Paul visited on his three missionary journeys, nor does anyone have any idea of the size of any congregation to which the New Testament letters were written.*⁸⁸

After all, "numerical growth can take place for wrong reasons. For example, during Jesus' ministry, much of the crowd that followed him was more interested in his miracles than in his message (John 6:26)."⁸⁹

In fact, the wrong measure of success can be outright deadly—lulling churches into thinking that they are doing well when in fact they are not. George Peters explains:

*Quantitative growth ... can be deceptive. It may be no more than the mushrooming of a mechanically induced, psychological or social movement, a numerical count, an agglomeration of individuals or groups, an increase of a body without the development of muscle and vital organs. . . . In many ways the expansion of Christendom has come at the expense of the purity of the gospel and true Christian order and life. The church has become infested with pagan beliefs and practices, and is syncretistic in theology. . . . Large segments have become Christo-pagan.*⁹⁰

Sadly, by watering-down the message and using unbiblical methods, CGM and its seeker-sensitive counterparts may be doing more harm than good—filling their auditoriums with vast crowds of lost people who think they're spiritually okay.

CONCLUSION

Having investigated both its evangelistic message and its evangelistic model, the sad conclusion is that the gospel according to Hybels and Warren falls far short of the biblical paradigm. Influenced more by

pragmatic business principles than by prescribed biblical precepts, it is little wonder that seeker-driven churches are both numerically vast and spiritually shallow. Christ, of course, promised that He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). However, "it is obvious that the building must be according to His plan. Attempting to build the church by human means only competes with the work of Christ."⁹¹

Instead of always looking for new ways to do ministry, pastors and evangelists should content themselves with studying and applying the biblical principles for evangelism— being ever mindful of their God-given calling. God has already given His church the instructions they need. When they invent their own instructions, the end result is guaranteed to fall short of His standards.

Willow Creek and Saddleback Church may be big, but at what cost? Neither their message nor their methods are biblical, meaning that they are "simply artificially inflated local churches with charismatically inflated super-pastors that will not be able to survive their supergrowth."⁹² As Richard Mayhue aptly concludes:

*The increase of probing, hard questions that pastors want to ask this very visible, "consumer" oriented church pastor about his ministry basis and style occasioned this article. Our fear is that if the next generation takes the path Hybels now travels [and Warren too], it will eventually arrive at the same destination as the modernist movement did earlier this century in America.*⁹³

In other words, the seeker-sensitive movement is quickly moving toward moral compromise and spiritual oblivion. The fact that it attracts large crowds merely suggests that its taking a lot of people down with it.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 24.

² For details on the numerical success of the church-growth movement see Donald A. McGarvan, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 5. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 1124. Grudem makes this comment: "It is true that the growth of the church as a percentage of world population has been remarkable in recent decades, and we should be greatly encouraged by this." Grudem goes on to cite Rick Wood, "Christianity: Waning or Growing?" in *Mission Frontiers Bulletin* (Pasadena, Calif.; Jan. – Feb., 1993), 25. Wood states, "Between 1950 and 1992, Bible believing Christians went from just 3% of the world population to 10% of the population. This is jump from 80 million to 540 million."

³ Elmer Towns, "The Relationship of Church Growth and Systematic Theology," *JETS* 29/ 1 (Mar 1986): 64.

⁴ For more on this see John Muether, "Contemporary Evangelicalism and the Triumph of the New School," *WTJ* 50/ 2 (Fall 1998): 343.

⁵ Guinness, *Dining*, 28. Guinness also lists other terms such as "niche marketing," "audience-driven," and "full-service churches."

⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1984), 201.

⁷ See McGarvan, *Understanding*, 5. McGarvan directly lists Willow Creek Community Church as part of the Church Growth Movement.

⁸ G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), back cover.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ Bill Hybels, *Christians in the Marketplace* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), 40-41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg. *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 209.

¹³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2002), 294.

¹⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 189.

¹⁵ Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 93.

¹⁶ McGarvan, *Understanding*, 8-9.

¹⁷ Howland, *Seeker Churches*, 78.

¹⁸ Ibid., 79. On page 85, Howland says the following: "For example, a Willow Creek series entitled *Yea God!* celebrated fourteen different aspects of God's character. According to the message titles, God is 'relational, expressive, wise, joyful, and equal opportunity employer, patient, a refuge, righteous, gracious, committed to me, generous, a guide, powerful, a servant.' From this list, only the terms 'righteous' and 'powerful' might indicate the God whom we celebrate with a big 'Yea!' 'is holy.'"

¹⁹ Ibid., 83. On page 86, Howland states: "Thus, in answer to the question 'Who is God?' seeker church pastors portray a God who 'loves you, is proud of you, believes in you, and will give you strength to stand up to the forces of evil in the world.' The following passage from a Willow Creek sermon [by Bill Hybels] provides an example of these reassuring tenets: '[God] is holy and righteous, but Jesus says, you also need to know that He loves to meet needs and to provide resources and to give love to love-starved people. He loves to surprise people with His goodness and ambush them with His grace. He loves to heal and renew and restore and save people. And He does it with joy. It's not a hardship. He doesn't do it in a begrudging way. That's what He's like. He's not just approachable; He's benevolent.'"

²⁰ Ibid., 95.

²¹ Ibid., 99.

²² Guinness, *Dining*, 78.

²³ Howland, *Seeker Churches*, 95.

²⁴ Ibid., 97. Howland simply contrasts the seeker church with the Calvinistic soteriology of George Whitfield.

²⁵ John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), electronic edition.

²⁶ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 99. Emphasis original.

²⁷ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 30.

²⁸ On balance, it should be noted that both Warren and Hybels also offer non-seeker services for regular church members. These services contain "deeper" preaching, even sometimes including verse-by-verse exposition. However, this bait-and-switch evangelistic message, where certain theological essentials are

deemphasized until a person commits to Christ, is misleading at best.

²⁹ See Guinness, 26. The author writes: "As a well-known [church-growth] proponent states, 'I don't deal with theology. I'm simply a methodologist'— as if his theology were thereby guaranteed to remain critical and his methodology neutral."

³⁰ See Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 197. Warren claims that his pragmatic approach comes from the example of Christ. He says, "I once read through the gospels in order to discover the standard approach Jesus used in evangelism. What I learned was that he didn't have one! He had no standard approach in witnessing. He simply started wherever people were. When he was with the woman at the well, he talked about living waters; when he was with fishermen, he talked about catching fish; when he was with farmers, he talked about sowing seed."

³¹ Hybels and Mittelberg, *Contagious Christian*, 175.

³² *Ibid.*, 62.

³³ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 251-77.

³⁴ The terminology for the seeker-sensitive movement appears to have emerged from the seeker terminology of Jonathan Edwards. Yet, even Edwards understood that: "If everything seekers do is wrong, the seeking they do is also wrong." Cited from John H. Gerstner and Jonathan Neil Gerstner, "Edwardsean Preparation for Salvation," *WTJ* 42/1 (Fall 1979): 26.

³⁵ John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 184.

³⁶ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 122.

³⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 103.

³⁸ Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2001), 166.

³⁹ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 294-95.

⁴⁰ Bill Hybels, "Speaking to the Secularized Mind," in *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989), 29-30. Emphasis original.

- ⁴¹ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 188.
- ⁴² Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 219. On page 189, he says, "the problem is, the longer you are a believer, the less you think like an unbeliever" implying that until one thinks like an unbeliever he will not be an effective witness.
- ⁴³ "Ministry," in *What Does the Bible Say About...* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 263. No author given.
- ⁴⁴ Guinness, *Dining*, 28.
- ⁴⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 253.
- ⁴⁶ Steven J. Lawson, "The Priority of Biblical Preaching: An Expository of Acts 2:42-47" *BSac* 158/ 630 (Apr 2001):198.
- ⁴⁷ Guinness, *Dining*, 27.
- ⁴⁸ Howland, *Seeker Churches*, 81.
- ⁴⁹ Hybels, "Speaking," 31. Emphasis original.
- ⁵⁰ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 231.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 242.
- ⁵² Clear communication is part of Hybel's evangelistic formula. His formula is as follows: High Potency + Close Proximity + Clear Communication = Maximum Impact. For more details on this formula, see Hybels and Mittelberg, *Contagious Christian*, 50. It is interesting to consider what has not been included in this formula (such as a biblical gospel message or a reliance on God's sovereign providence).
- ⁵³ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 234.
- ⁵⁴ Howland, *Seeker Churches*, 98.
- ⁵⁵ Hybels, "Speaking," 40. See also Howland, *Seeker Churches*, 79. Howland notes: "Seeker messages attempt to persuade seekers to 'buy' into an 'authentic' religious faith by offering inducements (for example, emphasizing the practical advantages of belief) rather than threats (for example, tirades about the consequences of disbelief)."
- ⁵⁶ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 200.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 208.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 229.

⁵⁹ See Stephen Lewis, "Review of *The Purpose Driven Church*," *CTSJ* 6/ 2 (Apr 2000):50-58. On p. 56, Lewis notes: "Not once does *The Purpose Driven Church* give a clear gospel message. In asking what people want (rather than what the Bible says they need) has Warren created followers or multitudes based upon their desires or perceived needs? Ironically, in John chapter 6, Jesus rebuked the very people He had just fed, because they only followed Him in search of more bread to satisfy their immediate hunger. Jesus met people's needs as a way of revealing and/ or authenticating Himself before men. Any model purposing to create followers based upon fulfilling perceived needs risks making this into an end in itself. Again, where does *The Purpose-Driven Church* give people what they really need, the gospel of grace?"

⁶⁰ James V. Heidinger II, "Toxic Pluralism," *Christianity Today* 37/ 4 (April 5, 1993):16- 17.

⁶¹ Dave Deuel, "The Pastor's Compassion for People," *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), electronic edition.

⁶² George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 145. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Hybels, *Contagious Christianity*, 14-15.

⁶⁴ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 276.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 157. See also p. 228 where Warren argues: "Your audience also determines how you *start* your message. If you are speaking to the unchurched and you spend the first part of the message on the historical background of the text, by the time you get to the personal application you will have already lost them. When speaking to the unchurched you need to *begin* where your sermons normally end up." (Emphasis original.) In fairness, on p. 79, he also states, "While we must be sensitive to the needs, hurts, and interests of seekers, and while it is wise to design evangelistic services that target their needs, we cannot allow seekers to drive the total agenda of the church." Unfortunately, his practice does not seem to back up his concern.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁶⁷ Hybels, *Contagious Christian*, 201.

⁶⁸ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 227.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 295.

⁷⁰ Guinness, *Dining*, 78.

⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

⁷² Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 270. Warren's clear lack of belief in God's sovereignty is very revealing.

⁷³ Hybels and Mittelberg, *Contagious Christianity*, 204.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁶ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 244.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 281-82.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 288.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 217.

⁸⁰ Hybels and Mittelberg, *Contagious Christianity*, 109-10.

⁸¹ Ronald D. Runyon, "Principles and Methods of Household Evangelism," *BSac* 142/565 (Jan 1985):71. The indented citation is from Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Pasadena, CA: Church Growth Press, 1982), 69.

⁸² Lawson, "Biblical Preaching," 212.

⁸³ Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 156. Emphasis added.

⁸⁴ Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 24.

⁸⁵ Howland, *Seeker Churches*, 79.

⁸⁶ Helge Stadelmann, "The Need for Ecclesiological Prolegomena in the Pursuit of Practical Theology," *TrinJ* 19/ 2 (Fall 1998): 223.

⁸⁷ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, electronic edition. For an opposing view see Towns, "Relationship," 65.

⁸⁸ Kenneth O. Gangel, "Marks of a Healthy Church," *BSac* 158/ 631 (Oct 2002): 468.

⁸⁹ Klassen and Koessler, 24.

⁹⁰ George Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 23-24.

⁹¹ MacArthur, *Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 151-52. On page 151, MacArthur says this: "The past decade or so has witnessed the development of what is called the church growth movement. Seminars, conferences, books, programs, and even special organizations are devoted exclusively to teaching and discussing principles and methods for church growth. Many of the efforts are helpful, but only to the extent they are consistent with the principles Paul teaches in Ephesians 4:12–16. Here in its most succinct form is God's plan by which Christ produces church growth."

⁹² Guinness, *Dining*, 29.

⁹³ Mayhue, Richard. "Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry," *TTMSJ* 6/ 1 (Spr 1995): 46.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arn, Win and Charles Arn. *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples*. Pasadena, CA: Church Growth Press, 1982.

Barna, George. *Marketing the Church*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988.

Comfort, Earl V. "Is the Pulpit a Factor in Church Growth?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140/ 557 (January 1983): 64-68.

Demarest, Bruce. *The Cross and Salvation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997.

Deuel, Dave. "The Pastors Compassion for People." In *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, edited by John F. MacArthur Jr., Richard Mayhue, and Robert L. Thomas, electronic edition. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995.

Gangel, Kenneth O. "Marks of a Healthy Church." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158/ 631 (October 2002): 467-77.

Gerstner, John H. and Jonathan Neil Gerstner. "Edwardsean Preparation for Salvation." *Westminster Theological Journal* 42/ 1 (Fall 1979): 5-71.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994.

Guiness, Os. *Dining with the Devil*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001.

Hendriksen, William. *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. New Testament Commentary series. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981.

Hybels, Bill. *Christians in the Marketplace*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988.

_____. "Speaking to the Secularized Mind." In *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, edited by Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson, 27-41. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989.

_____ and Mark Mittelberg. *Becoming a Contagious Christian*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Klassen, Ron and John Koessler. *No Little Places*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.

Lawson, Steven. "The Priority of Biblical Preaching: An Expository of Acts 2:42-47." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158/ 630 (April 2001): 198-217.

Lewis, Stephen. "Review of *The Purpose Driven Church*." *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 6/ 2 (April 2000): 50-58.

MacArthur, John. *Ashamed of the Gospel*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993.

_____. *Ephesians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986.

_____. *Romans 1-8*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.

Mayhue, Richard. "Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry." *The Master's Seminary Journal* 6/ 1 (Spring 1995): 39-56.

McGarvran, Donald A. *Understanding Church Growth*. Edited by C. Peter Wagner. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990.

Muether, John. "Contemporary Evangelicalism and the Triumph of the New School." *Westminster Theological Journal* 50/ 2 (Fall 1998): 339-47.

Muller, Richard A. "Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship: Toward Dialogue with

John Frame." *Westminster Theological Journal* 59/ 2 (Fall 1997): 301-310.

Murray, John. *The Epistle to the Romans*. New International Commentary of the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965.

Newman, Scott. "The Scandal of Reason— Part II: A Response to Post-Modern Evangelicalism." *Conservative Theological Journal* 2/ 4 (March 1998): 48-64.

Peters, George. *A Theology of Church Growth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.

Pritchard, G. A. *Willow Creek Seeker Services*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001.

Rainer, Thom. *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2001.

Runyon, Ronald D. "Principles and Methods of Household Evangelism." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142/ 565 (January 1985): 71.

Sargeant, Kimon Howland. *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Stadelmann, Helge. "The Need for Ecclesiological Prolegomena in the Pursuit of Practical Theology." *Trinity Journal* 19/ 2 (Fall 1998): 219-33.

Strobel, Lee. *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1993.

Towns, Elmer. "The Relationship of Church Growth and Systematic Theology." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29/ 1 (Mar 1986): 63-70.

Wagner, C. Peter. *Leading Your Church to Growth*. Ventura, CA: Regal Publishers, 1984.

Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1995.

_____. *The Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2002.