

# Doing Church Reflections and Ruminations

## ***The Issue***

One of the great questions faced by many congregations and church leaders today is “How should we do church?” By that we mean, how do we worship, fellowship, teach, and preach while walking the line between becoming traditional and stale or relevant and shallow? On one hand we have those who want to call us back to a traditional mode of worship and fellowship consisting of deep theological preaching, old hymns, and a somewhat puritanical withdrawal from the society around us lest we become polluted. On the other hand are those churches modeled after Willow Creek that blow all traditions aside and seek to become acceptable to the unbeliever by using marketing techniques drawn from Madison Avenue. In between these two extremes are a plethora of other positions.

Add to this climate the heated exchanges between proponents of these two camps. The “Traditionalists” accuse the “Hybelians” of selling out the gospel and watering down the truth until it is no truth at all. They accuse Hybelians of being more concerned about what the sinner thinks of God than what God thinks of the sinner. On the other hand, the Hybelians tell the Traditionalists to “get up with the times.” They say that it is impossible to reach our culture with the message of the gospel if we insist on doing church the way it was done fifty or one-hundred years ago.

My approach to this issue has been from a somewhat Traditionalist viewpoint. I grew up in church, and in fact, can’t remember a time when I didn’t attend church. I love the old hymns and deep, theological, expository preaching. I understand the Greek and Hebrew words bandied about by the great preachers of our day, and I take great delight in thinking deeply about biblical doctrine. However, what about my neighbor who doesn’t know what a Bible is? What about my culture that is rapidly losing any idea of what Christianity is all about, and who know more about the personal lives of their soap-opera stars than they do about Daniel, Elijah, and Joseph? What about a votership that equates Christianity with the Religious Right and Republicanism? How do I relate the message of the gospel to them?

This paper presents some of my personal thoughts along this line.

## ***Some Disclaimers***

Before even discussing this issue, I feel it is necessary to set in order some disclaimers. First, this short paper in no way represents a complete analysis of this topic - to do so would take a book. All I am trying to do in this paper is set forth some issues for discussion and debate and offer some of my own ruminations on this topic.

Secondly, I have found in my discussions about these issues that people have a very emotional and passionate feeling about their position—many times to the point that they do not even want to consider what the other side is saying. I have personally been accused of all kinds of things by those who fail to take the time to find out what I am really saying.<sup>1</sup> I have

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<sup>1</sup> I have been labeled as a modernist, feminist, and turncoat because I don’t take the ultra-traditional approach. I have been called a heretic, damned and on the way to hell, because I don’t think that the KJV is the only version of the Bible to use and all others are Satanic imitations. I have been accused of abandoning the “once-delivered-to-the-saints” faith because I don’t passionately believe in some of the traditions and viewpoints of my denominational background (which is the GARBC Baptist). I have been labeled a

often found strong disagreement on issues to the point that fellowship is broken over just about every theological issue spanning the spectrum from essential to preferential. There are certainly those areas over which we should divide, but is every theological issue a cause for potential division? I think not!<sup>2</sup> Where essentials are at stake we certainly must take a strong and uncompromising stand. But on other issues we need to be able to have a forum for debate and discussion. Hopefully, this paper will do just that.

### **Thoughts on This Topic**

In analyzing this issue, I have chosen to present my thinking as a list of statements with supporting arguments. These statements are listed in no particular order.

1. *For the most part, worship styles (music, preaching, order of service, etc.) are derived from traditions and culture, not the Bible.*

Of course, there are always the extremes, but excluding the extremes, worship style is largely a matter of culture and tradition. The hymns we sing, the order of service, even the mode and methods of baptism, are largely a result of tradition and not solid biblical exegesis.<sup>3</sup> We would not expect the church in the middle of the Amazon jungle to function exactly the same as our own church, or one in the jungles of Africa.

However, there are many who place our methods of worship right alongside the deity of Christ. In the book *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, there is a chapter on the music we should use in our churches. In that chapter the author, Leonard Payton, basically says that all modern Christian music and choruses, and most all of the old hymns, should be removed from our churches. He even admonishes us not to buy any modern Christian music! The entire tone of the chapter is that if we violate the authors recommendations about music we are sinning against God and worshipping incorrectly. Pastors are told to take “ecclesiastical authority” over the music in their church to the point of determining what music will be used and what styles will be allowed.

What the author fails to understand, I believe, is that he has gone way too far in his assessment of modern Christian music and is guilty of being so conservative that anything new is bad. I realize that not everyone will accept Payton’s assessment, but many today dislike the new music and fight to return to the “grand old hymns.” What we often don’t realize is that many of the modern hymns we sing today at one time were new choruses and hymns. In fact, many of the things we do in church today have as their basis some innovation in the past that at the time it occurred was considered aberrant, heretical, and even sinful to some.

For example, Martin Luther and Charles Wesley got the music to many of their hymns from the bars of their day. They took popular tunes sung in the ale-houses and bars and wrote Christian words. What we think is a grand old hymn in many cases started out as a drunken bar song with Christian words. Was this wrong? No! The Puritans originally did not even have singing as a part of the worship service. Singing only came into the church after a long and drawn-out battle in which many were branded as heretics and liberals. When the piano first made its way into the church it was scandalous! How could an instrument used in the bars be used in a church? Yet, I can’t think of many churches, not even the most conservative, that do not have a piano. Today the devil’s instrument is not the piano, it is the guitar.

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compromiser because I don’t vigorously attack anyone who likes the Promise Keepers, has a different view on the sign gifts than I have, or allows a woman to pray in church. I have been accused of “trampling underfoot” the blood of the covenant because I don’t think the blood of Christ was some magical fluid preserved in heaven even to this day to atone for our sins.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the accompanying paper on Drawing the Line for a fuller discussion of the essentials.

<sup>3</sup> We will argue the baptism issue later.

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For another example, let's look at invitations. When my church got a new pastor a few years back, a few members left because the new pastor did not have an invitation every service. His response was that if the service called for an invitation, one would be given, but not every service is an evangelistic service, and in many cases a call for salvation is out of order. What people failed to realize is that 150 years ago there were no invitations. The invitational system was started by Charles Finney, a Hyper-Arminian, who came up with the idea of the anxious seat and the sawdust trail. He pressured people into coming forward and sitting on the anxious bench until he talked or argued them into salvation<sup>4</sup>. If the truth be known, the origin of the invitation is founded in an aberrant evangelistic methodology based on an aberrant anthropology and soteriology, but today it is placed alongside the virgin birth as an essential.

Finally, what about Sunday night services? Is it necessary to have a Sunday night service? Certainly we would not want to suggest that it is wrong to meet together any day of the week, particularly Sunday. However, there are those who would suggest that if a church does not have a Sunday night service they are liberal, modern, or something worse. What many fail to understand regarding this issue is that Bible does not specifically state that it is necessary to have a Sunday night service, and in fact, for most of Church history there were no Sunday night services. If a church decides to omit the Sunday night service, or a member does not attend Sunday night services, that is no indication of sin or apostasy. Attendance at Sunday night services is a tradition that started in the late 1800's and is alive and well today. What we have done is elevate a tradition to the place of law, stapled a Bible verse on it (Hebrews 10:25, which by the way has nothing to do with my personal church attendance), and then put people on guilt trips that don't attend every time we open the church doors. We have allowed our traditions to take their place alongside the commandments of God just like the Pharisees of the New Testament.

2. *When the Bible does speak specifically about a method or style of worship, it should be obeyed without question. Additionally, any method or style of worship that violates Scripture or leads to sin is to be rejected.*

This is necessary because we must affirm that there are certain styles of worship that are wrong. God has not given us total freedom to do anything we want. Where the Bible specifically addresses a methodology or style, or where we would violate some spiritual principle, we need to decisively and firmly reject the methodology.

For example, it would be wrong for a church to hold a swimsuit competition in order to gain attendees, or serve free beer after the service to all who attend and sit through the sermon. Such methodologies lead to sin, in the first case lust and in the second drunkenness.

I also believe the case can be made for certain musical styles. Some of the modern rock-n-roll or rap music would be out of place in Church. Heavy metal, acid rock, and punk rock would be inappropriate mediums to communicate our worship through song. Additionally, music designed to generate emotional response without any use of the mind should be rejected. It is possible, as shown by the charismatics, to put people into an altered state of consciousness or a state of suggestibility by repetitiously singing a song again and again.

Where the rub comes is what about those methodologies or styles on which the Bible is silent? Some would suggest that if a methodology or style is not mentioned specifically in the Bible,

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<sup>4</sup> The basis of Charles Finney's evangelistic strategy was founded in his experience as a lawyer. He felt that a sufficiently persuasive presentation of the Gospel could convince any person to become a believer. For a much fuller treatment of Finney's theology regarding revival refer to *Charles Finney's Theology of Revival: Moral Depravity in the Master's Seminary Journal*, Fall 1995.

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then it is wrong. This would eliminate the piano, since there is no reference to a piano in the Bible, the baptistry, since the early church baptized in rivers and lakes, and electricity, since electricity didn't exist in Biblical times. On the other hand, we should incorporate tambourines, guitars, and other stringed instruments in our worship since that is what Israel did according to the book of Psalms. We should also incorporate dance since David danced before the Ark (and wasn't condemned for it).

Others suggest that if it is not mentioned in the Bible, then it is acceptable. They would say that anything that is expressly not forbidden is appropriate for use. I would probably tend to agree more with this viewpoint although I do believe that we need to exercise common sense and reasonable care when incorporating new methodologies and styles.

One example that we can debate along this line is drama. Is it wrong to have a skit or play depict some issue of the Christian life in our worship services? Some would say yes! Any use of drama, to them, would be out of place. Others would say no! The Bible does not forbid the use of drama hence why should we reject it? Of course, each of us has to work through this question ourselves, but I personally do not see the occasional use of drama to be inappropriate. I would oppose turning every worship service into a stage production, but there are those occasions when a drama would significantly add to a worship service.

Another example that shows the absolute necessity of following this rule is that of the role of women in the church. We have been subjected to immense cultural pressure on this issue, and as a result denominations and churches are ordaining women, erasing gender distinctions when it comes to roles in the home and church, and removing all gender barriers in ministry. The problem with this entire shift is that it is clearly against the teaching of Scripture. The Bible does affirm the spiritual equality of men and women, but when it comes to roles it teaches that there are clear distinctions. Women should not be ordained as pastors (2 Timothy 3), and should not be given roles which cause them to teach other men (2 Timothy 2). In spite of this very clear teaching, however, we are allowing the culture to shape our ministry and as a result we selectively apply the Bible to support our disobedience of it. Perhaps the clearest example of this is Willow Creek Community Church which has had women elders since the day of its inception.

The bottom line is that when the Bible is clear, we must take a stand! We cannot allow our culture and other societal pressures to affect our interpretation and application of the Bible.

3. *New methodologies do not insure success—God still gives the increase.*

Perhaps the greatest danger in incorporating new methodologies and styles is encountered at precisely this point. In fact, I think many of the "avant-garde" ministries that pioneer new methodologies and styles get off-track right here. As a ministry grows because of some method or style change, those in leadership begin to see the growth as a result of the method. Instead of attributing the growth to God, they attribute the growth to their own innovation and intelligence.

We need to realize that our service to God takes the form of a paradox. God is sovereign, and as a result any growth or effectiveness in ministry is ultimately up to his divine purposes. Christ states very clearly that "I will build my church." Nothing we can do, no method or style, can bring someone to God apart from a divine work of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it is a divine mystery that God has chosen to use us as instruments of his divine purposes. Being a good Calvinist, I firmly believe it is God who chooses and calls the elect to salvation and effects spiritual growth in their life. However, God has chosen me as the means whereby the message of salvation is delivered and uses men to effect his sanctifying purposes in the lives of believers. Just because God will save the elect does not mean I can ignore Matthew 28!

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Unfortunately, many ministries have totally forgotten about God and have promoted their own spin on how to get things done apart from the Holy Spirit. They would never come out and say that, but in effect that is what they have done. If the Holy Spirit disappeared tomorrow, many of these ministries would go right on functioning as if nothing happened.

This shift from God to man takes many different forms. Good management practices will help in the administration of a church and the effectiveness of a ministry, but all of the management techniques in the world will not bring someone to Christ apart from the Holy Spirit. Being a well-trained evangelist is helpful when presenting the gospel to the lost, but again, unless the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of the lost nothing will happen. Great music is an aid to worship, but without God it becomes sounding brass and clanging gongs. Good sermons filled with relevant illustrations and practical, biblical truth are good, but unless God opens the minds of the hearers and illuminates their hearts to the truth, the preacher is wasting his breath. A well-ordered service, good singing, drama, and a relevant sermon can all be used to teach biblical truth, but unless the Holy Spirit is there as well nothing good will happen.<sup>5</sup>

What has happened is that many churches approach ministry as practical Arminians. They believe that it is totally up to them to get the job done, and if someone does not come to Christ, or respond the way they should, the church or minister has failed. They see their methodology or style as a necessary ingredient for results. When those results are not achieved, they go back and tweak the methodology.

The truth of the matter is that it does not depend on us, but on God. We need to do our best, but the fruit of a ministry is not produced by our efforts but by God's grace. Paul labored to take the gospel to the lost although he understood that it was not ultimately his efforts, but God's grace, that brought the lost to salvation.

I believe that we can do many things to become more effective in our ministry and more focused in our worship, but we must be ever careful not to allow ourselves to think that the results are up to us.

4. *Methods change, but the message does not.*

By this I mean that the way in which we present truth to our culture changes, but the message of the Gospel never does. The reason methods change is that the culture changes. We cannot continue to use methodologies, terminologies, and practices used fifty and one-hundred years ago and expect to reach our culture. We must be sure to never change the message—the Gospel is eternal truth—but the way in which that truth is communicated must change with the times.

For example, most people have been exposed to desktop publishing and many have computers in their homes or are exposed to them on the job or in their schools. Why should we continue to produce our bulletins on mimeograph machines? Why not have our bulletins look like they were produced using the latest tools and technologies? Of course, we can go too far here, but let's at least get up with the nineties.

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<sup>5</sup> A good illustration of this is Willow Creek. Each service at Willow Creek is choreographed down to the outfits worn by the singers and the gestures used by the speaker. The service is timed down to the second, with each "act" following the other with practiced efficiency. My thought on this is "where does the Holy Spirit fit it?" If God wanted to do something would he be told that is not in the program! I think we need to have an order of service, and I am not adverse to making sure each part fits together well, but we need to make sure we do not leave the leading of the Holy Spirit out of the program. (For an excellent treatment of Willow Creek read the book, *Willow Creek Seeker Services* by Gary Pritchard [Baker Book House, 1996]).

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Another example is in the use of multimedia. We certainly would not want to advocate our churches to become the next Industrial Light and Magic, but an appropriate use of multimedia can enhance our worship. For example, instead of having everyone turn to their hymnbooks to locate the next song, display the words on an overhead using Microsoft Powerpoint or some other computer software package. People can then look up and sing without being distracted by the hymnbooks. Additionally, scripture texts could be projected there as well eliminating the rustling of pages as one tries to find the book of Haggai.

Finally, what about the World Wide Web? Why not spend a few dollars a month and have a website for our church listing its services, doctrinal statement, Biblical resources, sermon transcripts, prayer requests, directions to the church, and any other piece of information useful to a web-surfer? We are living in an information age where more and more people are using the internet and less and less are reading newspapers and using the phone book. When people want to find a good church to attend, they are more likely to surf the web than open the yellow pages.

What we have done, however, is create a time-warp in our churches where people travel back to the forties or fifties when they walk in.<sup>6</sup> We have hymnbooks that are falling apart being used by people who can't read music. Our bulletins look like something thrown together at the last minute and ran off on mimeograph machines. The use of faxes, computers, and the internet are notions that we don't even think about. Pastors pore through concordances like Strong's and Young's, and analyze the original Greek text of the passage for their next sermon, oblivious to the fact that there are computer software packages that can do in seconds what takes them minutes or even hours.

In advocating the use of technology I am well aware of the dangers if technology is taken to an extreme. We can be more concerned with the layout of the bulletin than what goes in it. We can be more concerned about image than content. However, I do believe we can successfully use technology to further the message of the gospel and enhance the effectiveness of our ministries.

5. *The message does not change, but the words used to convey the message must change if we are to be effective in communicating the Gospel.*

It is amazing to me how boring services can be to those who are unbelievers as well as believers. I have been in services where the language used is so obtuse and filled with theological terms that most attendees in the service have no idea what is being said. We open the King James Bible and use words that haven't been used for two-hundred years, pray in King James, and then wonder why people don't think the Bible is relevant and understandable.

Of course, I realize that this opens a can of worms for the KJVonlyers<sup>7</sup>, but I believe that we need to use modern language to convey the eternal truths of the Gospel. Please understand, I am not saying that the message must change, only the terms used to convey the message must change. Using archaic words and language does not aid the transmission of the Gospel—it hinders it! I firmly believe that we should use a translation understandable to our culture and

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Hendricks relates an experience he had as a consultant to a church that was having trouble. It seems that they had stagnated in their growth and were suffering some severe financial problems. After some analysis, Hendricks suggested that the way in which they could overcome their financial problem was to build a fence around the church and charge admission to see "how church was done in the 1940's."

<sup>7</sup> At the risk of starting a heated debate, I have read and heard most of the arguments used to promote the KJV only theory. It is my conclusion that the arguments are founded on tradition, bad logic, and a complete misunderstanding of the process of textual criticism. There is no way one can prove that the KJV Bible is the only valid translation, and when one attempts to do so they fall into so many non-sequitur arguments, posturing, and ad-hominem accusations that they would immediately receive a failing grade in any class on debate. I have concluded that the translation one uses is based in tradition and preference, not exegesis and logic.

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not something understandable to the culture of the 1700's. Instead of using obtuse theological terms, let's use language understandable to the common person.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, I am amazed at how different we speak in church and in public life. Many, when asked to pray, revert to King James English, using thee, thou, and thine. They would never use this speech in their everyday life, but somehow they think that by using this language in prayer they have a better chance of being heard by God. Why not speak to God in plain language? Why not talk to God as we talk to a friend? Instead of being concerned with what we say, we are concerned with how we say it. As a result, we are no different than the hypocritical Pharisees in Matthew 6 who thought they would be heard with their canned prayers and rituals.

The same goes for the style of preaching. I have personally been exposed to debates on preaching styles in my own local church. Many disliked the use of modern illustrations to emphasize points in the sermons. They wanted more Old Testament illustrations drawn from the stories in the Bible and less from the modern culture. Unfortunately, the use of Old Testament illustrations is fine for those who know the stories, but what about those who have no idea of who the Old Testament characters are? I remember several times referring to events from the life of Elijah and Elisha, only to draw blank looks from students in my Moody classes. Of course we would not want to exclude the use of Old Testament illustrations, but the issue is not the illustration used but the success of the communication. Are we clearly and effectively communicating the truth of the Word of God? I think that if many of those who complain about preaching styles lived two thousand years ago they would be griping about this teacher from Nazareth who talks about leaven, fig trees, pearls, treasure, wineskins, sowers, nets, and fish. They would complain that he is not using rabbinical terms and the stories from the Old Testament to communicate his message but is using mundane and common expressions. Christ did not employ the theo-speak of his day, rather he used language that the common person could understand. We should do no less.

6. *When we allow our culture to change our message, we have gone too far.*

This ties in with the third point but deserves a little more specific attention. One of the major arguments against changing methodologies is that many times a change in method is followed by a change in theology. We cannot allow this to happen. Whenever we become more concerned about the method than the message, we have gone too far and need to re-examine our methodology<sup>9</sup>.

We do have a very real danger here! For example, if our methodology calls for us to be completely non-offensive in our presentation of the gospel message, then terms like sin, hell,

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<sup>8</sup> I do want to make a point that I am not advocating the abandonment of theological terms. I believe there is a place to use them, but I would suggest that we limit their usage when speaking to unbelievers. We can convey the same meaning of these theological terms using common language. Unfortunately, most of the people in our churches couldn't give an accurate definition of many of these terms we sprinkle liberally in our messages, and because of this we have great confusion about our theology. Let's use the terms, but use them correctly. Let's make sure that people understand what they mean and the implication they have for our theology and practice.

<sup>9</sup> Examples of this are common today. One major way in which we have allowed our culture to shape our theology and message is in the psychologization of Christianity. Many ministries today center around psychological fads rather than the Word of God and hence corrupt the message. One example of this is MPD, or Multiple Personality Disorder. One Christian "psychologist" suggests that when counseling people with MPD it is necessary to individually identify and lead each personality to Christ. This poses a problem if a person dies and only three of the eight personalities are "saved." Where does the person go?

It seems that most Christians can more easily identify whether they are a lion, beaver, golden retriever, or eagle than they can identify patterns of sin in their own lives. They are more in tune with their Sanguine, Melancholic, Phlegmatic, or Choleric identity than they are with their identity in Christ. The reason for this psychological quagmire in the church is simple, we got it from the world! Our message has been changed by our culture. Christianity is now an alternate therapy, and God becomes the great celestial therapist.

death, eternal punishment, and the lake of fire have to go. It is not good to tell someone “God loves you but has an awful plan for your life unless you repent” if you are trying to stay positive. Probably one of the best examples of the danger of this is Robert Schuller, who has essentially redefined every negative concept in the Bible in terms of his methodology of “positive self-esteem.”

I believe that we need to be continuously evaluating our message for any drift. If we find ourselves avoiding certain “negative” topics because they are not popular, we have crossed the line. If we are afraid to use the “S” word (sin) in our message, we have crossed the line. If we, in any way, water down or change the gospel, we have gone too far. If we communicate the message of the gospel in terms or concepts used by modern pop-psychology, we have gone too far.

We need to keep foremost in our mind that the gospel is, at its core, offensive. It tells man that he is rotten to the core, unable to save himself, headed for an eternity in the lake of fire, and there is nothing he do about it! This is offensive, especially in our day of positive self-esteem. Our message is offensive, but we need not be offensive. Many times we are obnoxious and caustic in our approach to sharing the gospel and when we are rejected chalk it up to persecution. We forget that Christ was never abrasive although his message was. Let’s make sure people reject our message, not the messenger.

7. *We cannot allow our fear of change to keep us from being innovative.*

Sometimes we find ourselves so afraid to change that we wind up doing nothing. We are so concerned about how we should start and run an evangelistic program that we never get around to sharing our faith. Certainly we need to be cautious about change, but we cannot allow our caution to force us into a no-change mentality. Someone once said that the seven last words of the church were “we never did it that way before.”

Sometimes we fail to see that the early church had to be innovative in order to grow and thrive. In Acts 6 we find a problem in regard to food distribution that was solved with the innovation of identifying and ordaining deacons to do this work. Paul gives specific instructions in 2 Timothy 5 about dealing with elderly widows in the church, an innovation that arose out of a need. In fact, during the first few centuries we see a lot of innovations in methodologies and styles as the church grew and adapted to the culture. We see it spread from the temple to the synagogue to houses and then to buildings. We see its governmental structure shift and change as it grew larger and larger.

I believe God has given us far more leeway in methodologies and styles than we would like to think. Church history itself proves that styles and methodologies come and go. Do we worship today like they did in Reformation times? Of course not! If we were to enter a time machine and travel back to the first century we would be amazed at the way in which they worshipped. Conversely, if we were to pick up a person from the first century and transport them to our church to attend next Sunday they would be shocked at the changes. To assume that our generation is the first generation that “does church right” is arrogant.

8. *We need to understand that all churches are composed of believers and unbelievers. We cannot exclusively minister to only one group at the expense of the other.*

Some say that the purpose of the church, as defined in the New Testament book of Ephesians, is to build up the saints to do the work of the ministry. As a result, they would say that the worship service is not to be centered on the unbeliever (or seeker, pre-Christian, or some other term), but on the believer. Others say that the purpose of the church is evangelistic, and that every service should be centered on an evangelistic message.

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What I think both sides fail to understand is that in every church, with rare exceptions, both believers and unbelievers exist side-by-side. I do not believe one should design their church ministry around one group while at the same time excluding the other. I do not, for example, believe it is wrong to have a “seeker-sensitive” church service provided that it is not the only service provided. On the other hand, I do not think it is wrong to have a “Bible Study” service provided there are others focused on reaching the lost.

Most churches I know act more like country clubs than hospitals. They have an exclusive list of requirements for anyone to join or feel comfortable there—a list which keeps the “undesireables” out. They gather to promote their own spin on doctrine, talk about how their’s is the only church that “does it right,” and ignore the lost. Any evangelistic program they may have is more interested in making the person conform to their theology than making them a disciple of Christ (which includes evangelization, baptism, and teaching.) The issue is that we don’t gather to equip, but to indoctrinate, and we don’t scatter to evangelize, but to proselytize. Anyone who does not conform to our brand of theology, or our way of doing church, is considered to be less than spiritual. Our focus is not on making disciples, which includes all facets of ministry, but in making clones of ourselves.

I think that what has happened here is that we have taken patterns of worship and services found in the New Testament and transferred them to us. In doing so, however, we have committed two errors. First, we assume that the patterns found in the New Testament are the only valid patterns. I would disagree with this. If the pattern of our worship was essential truth, then God would have told us and it would be a lot clearer than it is (of course, where it is clear we need to be obedient). Secondly, even those who believe we need to follow these patterns apply this hermeneutic inconsistently. For example, they would argue we need to baptize by immersion because that was the pattern of the early church, but we can change the way to do communion, the way we govern our churches, and the way we care for widows, and think nothing of it<sup>10</sup>.

One example of how the church is composed of believers and unbelievers is the book of Hebrews. Although there are some who would disagree, I see the book of Hebrews as being written to a group of people consisting of true believers, unbelievers, and undecideds. The writer not only affirms the believers, he warns the undecideds of pending apostasy and calls the unbelievers to salvation. In fact, if the writer was to preach a sermon to this church, all three groups of people would be addressed.

What has happened, however, is that we have reacted against churches who just preach evangelistic messages and never build up the saints, or who are always building up the saints and never evangelizing. For a church to be effective, it must do both, and I believe it is not wrong to do both in the context of a worship service. What better way to worship God than to being someone to salvation?

9. *New methods of evangelization, or new ways of communicating the gospel in a culturally relevant way, are not wrong—in fact, that is the methodology used by the early church.*

We are being told today that any method of evangelization which does not confront the lost head-on is bad, ineffective, and to be discarded. We are told we must preach “hell fire and

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<sup>10</sup> I think that many of us really need to examine this area. Why will we argue and fight about Baptism by immersion (which I believe is the best picture and what I would do as the pastor of a church), and not argue and fight about the plurality of elders (which, quite honestly, we can make a much better argument for)? If we accept as essential the pattern of the former, why not the pattern of the latter? This is only one example. Others would be the way we care for widows, the way in which we do communion, and the way in which we meet to worship (i.e. house to house rather than a church building).

brimstone”, and anything short of that is compromise. Any attempt to make the gospel relevant to our culture or hearers is a full-scale sell-out, and as such is to be condemned.

What I find so confusing with this thinking is that those who say this fail to see the inconsistency with which they apply their rules of what is, and is not, a proper form of evangelism. For example, if a missionary returns from the mission field and talks about how it has taken him five or six years to learn the language and the culture of the people he is trying to reach, we applaud him and increase our support. We agree with him that he needs to understand the people he is evangelizing before he can communicate the message in language, terms, and concepts they understand. However, if someone were to say the very same thing about reaching the lost in their community, they are branded liberals, heretics, and compromisers. Why is it that we are allowed to be culturally relevant on the mission field, but not in our own backyard? Why is it acceptable, and even desirable, to find ways to communicate the gospel to heathen in language and terms they understand while at the same time castigating those who attempt to do the same in Post-Christian America?

The bottom line is that we need to be creative in the way in which we communicate the gospel so that it can be clearly heard by our culture in culturally relevant terms. We cannot water down the gospel, remove its offensive elements, or in any way change the message, but that does not mean we cannot communicate it in better ways. Most people do such a dismal job at communicating the gospel that most unbelievers do not know what they are rejecting.

### **Conclusion**

What we have today is two separate reactions. One tells us to go back to some point in the past. They tell us we need to once again get in tune with the Old Time Religion. The other group says innovate all the way. Throw out all traditions and practices and let's have a free-for-all.

Neither side, I believe, is right. I believe we need to be innovative in our approach to worship styles and methodologies while at the same time recognizing the dangers of both moving ahead and going back. Where the Bible speaks definitively, we need to be obedient, but where there is silence, we need to exercise discernment.

I don't think this is an easy task. We are oftentimes so bound by our traditions and methodologies that we fail to consider there may be other valid ways to do things. I think we need to ask ourselves the tough questions, “why am I doing this?”, “can this be done another way?”, and “how can I be effective in ministry?”

I also don't think this a cave-in to pragmatism. Being pragmatic in our ministry while striving to be Bible-based is not wrong. The early church was pragmatic, and because of their pragmatic approach to the problem of food distribution we have deacons. Not all pragmatism is bad, only that which ignores clear Biblical guidelines and commands.

Of course, we all need to analyze these issues ourselves. My challenge is that we think through the issues before taking an emotional stand in the past or throwing everything out as we go for the new.

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