

AN INVITATION TO INVITATION

A few years ago there was a New Yorker cartoon showing a sign outside an old stone church building reading, "Preaching to the Choir Since 1846". This cartoon points to an important question for churches: To what degree should our worship services train and nurture believers, and to what degree should they reach out to others? Should we follow the seeker-friendliness popular in some mega-churches, or should we focus on the business of the church and simply allow visitors to join in?

What did the early church do? In the first-century Roman empire, religious devotion to a deity was not exclusive. While an Ephesian might owe allegiance primarily to Artemis, there was nothing scandalous or extraordinary about attending a feast in honor of Isis, or a service of worship to Zeus. Evidence suggests that friends invited outsiders to religious events. Similarly, while Jews stood out in their refusal to worship other gods, many synagogues were nevertheless hospitable toward Gentile visitors. Many passages in Acts describe Gentiles as present in the synagogues of Asia minor (e.g. Acts 13:16; 14:1; 17:1-5, etc.). Early Christians seem to have also invited outsiders, so that Paul had to instruct the church in Corinth regarding use of the gift of tongues in the presence of visitors (1 Cor 14:22-25). Likely early Christians saw this outreach as a way to follow Jesus' example in seeking the lost sheep and bringing them into the fold.

We should imitate the early church in this not just because it was effective; seeking the lost by extending hospitality, by inviting outsiders to participate in the worship and fellowship of the church, resonates with Jesus' ministry at the deepest levels. There is no exact parallel in Jesus' ministry: He isn't recorded as having invited sinners and tax collectors to the synagogues. However, Jesus preached to and shared table fellowship with the "outsiders" of Israel, the tax collectors and sinners and even Samaritans.

If we follow the New Testament pattern we too will invite unbelievers to our worship services. Indeed, a primary form of outreach for us has to be simply inviting others to church. A large 2004 Presbyterian Church U. S. A. survey found that the leading reason why newcomers began attending a given church is that they were invited. Some of those we invite will certainly be believers who are looking for a new church home. But they shouldn't be the sole target of our outreach. Studies have shown that over 80% of numerical growth in American evangelical churches consists of transfers of believers from one church to another. To follow the New Testament model of church growth, we must go beyond this to reach out to the unchurched.

Does inviting the unchurched have implications for how we structure and conduct our worship services? In 2001, Thom Rainer published a ground-breaking study in which he surveyed over 300 people in various congregations and denominations across the United States who were previously *unchurched*. He asked them a host of questions regarding their decisions to begin attending church. Some of the things he learned fly in the face of the received wisdom regarding seeker friendliness and outreach. (As with any sociological study, there are subtleties of definition and method which bear scrutiny, so I encourage you to read his book, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*.)

A key result of this survey is that when the formerly unchurched were asked what factors led them to choose their church, 90% responded that preaching was the main factor. Just behind this, 88% responded that doctrines led them to the church of their choice. A much lower but still significant 49% said that the friendliness of the church members was a deciding factor. Other attributes such as Sunday school, youth ministries and even location only appeared in about 25% fewer of the responses. Worship style and music were important for only 11% of those surveyed. (This should not be taken to minimize the importance of worship, only to indicate the influence it had on the formerly unchurched in this survey.)

When surveyors followed up by asking about the role the pastor and his or her preaching played in their choice of church, there were various responses. The most frequently named factor, found in 60% of the respondents, was preaching that teaches—that is to say, preaching which goes beyond motivation. (Which isn't to say motivation is unimportant!) The next on the list, at 42%, was preaching which included application to one's life.

When you put these together you find something antithetical to much of the common thinking on church growth. Rather than softening the preaching for the sake of unbelieving visitors, this survey suggests we will have better success reaching them with solid preaching which challenges and teaches the congregation. Two observations may be made regarding this approach: First, this is also the sort of preaching which mature Christians need. Passages such as Heb 5:12-14 and 1 Cor 3:2 imply that we need a steady diet of preaching which challenges us by going beyond the basics, preaching which not only motivates, but teaches. Second, time and again in the gospel accounts we see Jesus also pushing his listeners rather than worrying that his challenging message might drive them away. (Jn 6:43-66 is a great example of this.) Certainly this did drive away some listeners. But it's not clear that putting on the kid gloves would have been more successful at convincing those who left to devote their lives to following him.

I was raised in the Episcopal church, whose members often joke about their difficulty with evangelism. Though outreach is a duty rather than an option (see for instance Art. 5 of the second main point of doctrine in the Canons of Dort), I know I sometimes find it hard to share my faith. However, I feel much more at ease inviting people to church. This is not to say invitations to church are a substitute for sharing the Gospel—in 1 Pet 3:15 believers are told to *always* be ready to give an account of the hope that lives within us—but they should be an important part of our outreach. Good intentions aren't enough; outreach needs to be done deliberately. I would like to challenge each of us to

identify at least one unbeliever or lapsed Christian to invite to church before the summer is out. Let's pray that God will soften the hearts of those we invite, and as we select a full-time pastor, let's make ours the sort of church which not only feeds its members with challenging, exegetical preaching, but draws in unbelievers as well.