

The title of this morning's sermon is "*Equip the Saints Versus Seeker Sensitive.*"

We are resuming our sermons on the vision of the church. As I told you in my last message this is not primarily about our theology. Instead, I want to define why we do things the way we do.ⁱⁱⁱ

This morning we're going to be talking about why we want to equip the saints versus being seeker sensitive.

The term seeker sensitive is an umbrella term encompassing lots of different churches and lots of different practices. It's very reasonable that across the spectrum some seeker sensitive churches are doing a better job than others. So my point isn't that everything I say applies to every seeker sensitive church, but I do think what I'll say generally applies to churches under this umbrella.

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The other day I read this quote...

"When a church changes biblical truths and standards to match current culture they are no longer following the Bible, they are following the lost."

And I think this describes what happened with seeker sensitive churches and brings us to lesson one...

We don't want to be seeker sensitive because (lesson one) it typically means pleasing man versus God.

The seeker sensitive movement is about trying to give people what they want versus giving God what he wants. The focus of the seeker church is not Christ-centered, but man-centered.

Bob Burney is a pastor, church planter, and radio show host. He described what it was like being trained to be a seeker sensitive church...

"The size of the crowd rather than the depth of the heart determined success. If the crowd was large then surely God was blessing the ministry. Churches were built by demographic studies, professional strategists, marketing research, meeting 'felt needs' and sermons consistent with these techniques. We were told that preaching was out, relevance was in. Doctrine didn't matter nearly as much as innovation. If it wasn't 'cutting edge' and consumer friendly it was doomed. The mention of sin, salvation, and sanctification were taboo and replaced by Starbucks, strategy, and sensitivity."

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Seeker sensitive churches will use the means that are most attractive to unbelievers to reach them, which generally means making the church as comfortable, inviting, and non-offensive as possible.

Theatrics and entertainment are often the norm to keep the services interesting and exciting. Thousands of dollars can be spent on state of the art lighting and sound.

This isn't to say we shouldn't spend money on lighting and sound. We've improved our lighting and updated our sound system, but I believe we did, not to be more exciting or entertaining, but so people could better read the word and hear the sermons.

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Because many of the traditional elements of church services aren't attractive to unbelievers, they end up being removed. This includes:

- Scripture reading
- Hymnsⁱⁱⁱ
- Lengthy sermons – typically the sermons, and that might not even be the best word to describe them, are shorter and focused on self-help.
- Communion – we might talk more about communion later, but it's worth mentioning now that even though communion played a central role in the early church's weekly worship service, it is often rarely observed, or

even removed from Sunday morning services. One of the first churches we attended had communion monthly at the midweek service, which far fewer people attended.

Grace to You, which is John MacArthur's ministry, wrote...

"It's all the rage today. If your church is struggling to reach people and be relevant, do away with preaching, hymns, and anything traditional. Instead, do what successful corporations do: give people what they want. A hip environment, convenient services, lots of contemporary music or drama, and maybe a catchy campaign. Downplay doctrine or Christian lingo. If you must preach, keep it short and upbeat. That is the seeker church movement that's rapidly transforming countless congregations."

The seeker sensitive movement hasn't only changed the way church services take place, it has also changed the way church planting takes place...

They pioneered a whole new method that involves sending out surveys to the community to see what people like. They conduct studies of the demographics. Unbelievers and unchurched people are asked what they want in a church. Then the new church is built with those answers in mind. In other words, the church is literally built to satisfy unbelievers.

The most influential book in this movement was *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren.

Some years back I started reading it, but I stopped a few chapters in because it was SO focused on having a church that was attractive to the local people. The question never seemed to be, "What does the Bible say, or what does God want?" Instead, the constant question was, "What do people want? What will please them?"

Just last month Rick Warren ordained three women as pastors. I wasn't surprised, because if you want to please the world, and the world becomes more feminist and blurs or even removes the line men and women, then it's only a matter of time until you go that direction.

You can probably guess how preaching is negatively affected...

As soon as you're concerned about unbelievers and how they feel and what they want, inevitably you're going to be tempted to become a preacher of prosperity theology:

- You won't preach on sin, repentance, holiness, hell, God's wrath or judgment, the need for forgiveness, the exclusiveness of Christ for salvation, because these would be considered divisive and condemning of other religions.
- You won't preach on coming to Christ to be saved from your sins. Instead, you'll tell people to come to Christ because:
 - He makes your life better
 - He gives you everything you've ever wanted
 - He fulfills your wildest dreams
 - Your job will be better
 - Your finances will be better
 - Your health will be better
 - All your relationships will be better

And when this is the foundation for people to come to Christ you can imagine what happens when they experience trials. They abandon Christ, because:

- He isn't doing what they were told He would do. He seems like a failure.
- Or He doesn't love them as much as he loves others that He blesses
- Or they simply believe that Christianity is not real

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There are a number of well-known seeker sensitive churches, but I'm going to focus on Willow Creek because it has been the most prominent and influential.

If the *Purpose Driven Church* is the most influential book in this movement, then Willow Creek is the most influential church.

The church was pastored by Bill Hybel's who recently resigned after allegations of sexual misconduct were made against him. But when the church was under his leadership it reached an average attendance of nearly 24,000 in 2018.

Bill had a vision for church that was heavily influenced by corporate America. He had a poster outside his office that said...

"What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?"

This wouldn't actually be a bad poster for a pastor to have outside his office IF he answered the questions correctly.

The first question: what is our business?

Think of the beginning of the Baptist and Presbyterian catechisms...

"What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

We could say this is our business.

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Who is our customer?

We would say God.

What does God consider value?

This could be a long answer, but those things that he's commanded of believers in the Bible.

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But I don't think this is what Bill Hybels had in mind. I think when he talked about his customer, and what his customer valued, he was referring to man.

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Because Willow Creek saw itself as a business trying to please man instead of a church trying to please God, they focused on creating large elaborate programs and activities where the measure of success was numbers instead of agreement with God's Word. They were able to succeed in their goal of growing numerically. They grew so much, thousands of churches across the country copied them hoping to experience the same kind of numerical growth.

One of the problems though with following the example of other churches instead of following God's Word is those churches might end up being wrong.

I mention that because after all these churches followed Willow Creek, something happened...

Willow Creek conducted a thorough, multiple-year study of their ministry and found their programs and activities didn't lead to spiritual growth. To Bill's credit, he was open about their findings and I want to share part of what he said about the results of their study...

"Some of the stuff we put MILLIONS OF DOLLARS INTO, thinking it would help our people grow and develop spiritually...the data said it wasn't helping people that much. We made a mistake. When people crossed the line of

faith and became Christians, we should have started teaching them to take responsibility and become self-feeders. We should have taught people how to read their bibles between services and do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.”

In other words, they found spiritual growth doesn't occur through doing whatever is most attractive to the customer. You could say they found spiritual growth doesn't come through being seeker sensitive and doing whatever brings in the most people.^{iv}

I think one of the worst ironies about seeker sensitive churches is they actually tend to cause unbelievers to feel the opposite of the way they should feel when they come to church...and this brings us to lesson two...

We don't want to be seeker sensitive because (lesson two) we want unbelievers to be convicted.

Let me get one thing out of the way first so it doesn't nag you as we talk about this lesson...

When unbelievers come to church:

- We want them to feel welcomed
- We want to be friendly to them
- We even want to show them an amount of grace that we wouldn't show longtime members. For example:
 - If longtime believing friends come to church and:
 - They are dressed immodestly
 - They use language that is crude
 - The kids are unruly
 - Assuming you care about these friends, you are going to gently, but honestly, address this with them
 - But if unbelievers come to church and:
 - They are dressed immodestly
 - Or they use crude some language
 - Or their kids are unruly
 - You're going to show them grace. You are not going to blow them out of the water.

But because we also want to see unbelievers become believers, we also want them convicted so they repent and put their faith in Christ.

Let me ask you to think about something...

How should unbelievers from the world feel in church if they haven't committed their lives to Christ?

I would say they should feel the same way believers should feel in worldly places...which is convicted.

For example, if believers go into:

- Bars filled with drunkenness
- Clubs filled with foul music and foul dancing
- Movies filled with compromising material

They should feel convicted.

Think about last week's sermon and the way Lot felt in Sodom and Gomorrah...

2 Peter 2:8 (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, HE WAS TORMENTING HIS RIGHTEOUS SOUL OVER THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS THAT HE SAW AND HEARD)

If you're familiar with Lot's behavior you could very easily doubt that he's a believer. But one of the evidences of his salvation is that he experienced so much turmoil while in such a wicked place.

And just like believers should be convicted in worldly places, unbelievers should be convicted in holy places...such as the church.

We know this is the case because of the way the gospel sounds to believers versus unbelievers...

To believers, the gospel couldn't sound better. We love it. We are refreshed and encouraged by it.

But how does the gospel sound to unbelievers?

Convicting. Condemning. Offensive

2 Corinthians 2:15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

When Paul said **we are the aroma of Christ**, he meant he and his traveling companions who were preaching the gospel:

- To believers they smelled great: a fragrance of life
- To unbelievers they stunk: a fragrance of death

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

If the word of the cross – which is another way to refer to the gospel – sounds like folly to those who are perishing – which refers to unbelievers – what's going to happen when you construct your worship service around people who think the gospel is foolish?^v

And because the gospel is foolish to unbelievers, seeker sensitive churches are discouraged from preaching it...or they preach it in some way that is softer, less offensive, more attractive, and more palatable.

But when the gospel is watered down so the unbeliever is made to feel more comfortable, then the pointedness and conviction is removed and it is no longer the gospel.

Instead, it is a hollow shell of the truth that is empty of the substance that would allow these people to be saved. Unbelievers can't even reject it, because it doesn't force any decision in their lives.

Bill Izard said...

“If we are obsessed with making our Christian worship comfortable and non offensive to [unbelievers who] hate [God], we are in danger of denying Him and His call to holy living. Are we justified in taking such a risk, only that we may not offend? Surely Christians are not to seek to offend, but Christ says those who follow Him will be offensive – it is unavoidable.”

John MacArthur said...

“Churching the unchurched is an absolute fallacy – it's like purposing to let the tares in. It is absolutely bizarre to want to make unsaved people feel comfortable in a church. The church is a group of worshiping, redeemed, and sanctified people among whom an unbeliever should feel either miserable, convicted and drawn to Christ, or else alienated and isolated. Only if the church hides its message and ceases to be what God designed the church to be, can it make an unbeliever comfortable.”

In one of Jake Motzkus's recent sermons he shared a testimony about attending church as an unbeliever who was living in sin. He gave me permission to re-share part of it...

"I found myself seated in the back row of a church at the age of twenty three, about to hear my very first sermon. Sitting next to me was my high school sweetheart, whom I lived with, unmarried.

I'm not exaggerating:

- *I had never heard the gospel.*
- *I didn't know who Christ was.*
- *I'd never stepped foot inside of a church except for weddings or funerals.*

I had no understanding of Christianity.

Through the providence of God, the message preached that morning brought the law powerfully to bear on my life. It was a message devoted to God's hatred and wrath for sexual sin. Now I'm not entirely sure what I expected to hear that morning, but I certainly wasn't prepared to hear about God's wrath toward me.

Like most, I believed I was a good person. I thought that God would be pleased with me that I had taken the time to be there that day. But as I sat, hearing the word of God preached, I became aware of just how displeased God was with me.

The preacher said the wages for my sin was death. That was stunning to me. I wanted to melt into my seat, or find an excuse to leave.

You have to understand, every word this man spoke rang true in my ears. It was as if the Lord Himself was speaking to me. At one point, I remember looking up at the people sitting around me, and they were smiling. I thought to myself, how can they smile? Am I the only one this message has condemned? Irrationally, I believed that was true. I was the only one there who had violated God's law and deserved death.

But then, thank God, before I could find a way to get out of there, the gospel was preached. Hope was offered. God sent His Son to die in my place - to take the death sentence for me. Reconciliation was available to the God I had so offended.

I left that church a different person than when I entered. I couldn't have put words to it. I didn't know anything about anything, except for this: Jesus was my Savior, and I couldn't live like I was living anymore."

But think about this...

What if, that morning, Jake heard some watered down, soft message about prosperity that lacked any real conviction?

And my testimony is pretty similar to Jake's. I thought good people went to heaven, and bad people go to hell. Which is actually true, if you understand there are no good people because we have all sinned, and there's only been one Person good enough to be able to go to heaven, and that's Jesus.

But when I went to church and learned that all of us are sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God, the search was on for me to find a way to avoid being punished for my sins in eternity in hell.

R.C. Sproul said...

"One does not structure the church to meet the felt needs and desires of [unbelievers]. The purpose of corporate assembly, is for the people of God to come together corporately to offer their sacrifices of praise and worship to God. So the first rule of worship is that it be designed for believers to worship God in a way that pleases God."

RC Sproul makes the point that the worship service is primarily for believers...and this brings us to lesson three...

We don't want to be seeker sensitive because (lesson three) we want believers equipped and sanctified.

When we talk about the vision of our church, this is one of the fundamental issues: the focus of the worship service.

In seeker sensitive churches the focus is taken off believers and put on unbelievers, and this is a reversal of God's desire.

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When the purpose of the worship service is put on unbelievers, guess what happens to believers in the church?

They're left spiritually emaciated and starving, which is tragic because they're supposed to be equipped and sanctified.

Let me show you a passage that makes this very clear. Please turn to Ephesians 4. We will start at verse 11.

I want to read through these verses quickly so that you can catch the theme. Listen for the emphasis on growth and maturity...

Ephesians 4:11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,

These are the primary offices in the church. One quick point about them. We know apostles and prophets are not a continuing office, because two chapters earlier it says...

Ephesians 2:20 [the church is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

The apostles and prophets laid the foundation, which means they don't go up to the second, third and fourth floors. This is why we don't see qualifications for apostles and prophets, like we do for elders and deacons.

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But with that in mind, listen to what these offices are supposed to do...

Ephesians 4:12 to EQUIP THE SAINTS for the work of ministry, for BUILDING UP THE BODY of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to MATURE MANHOOD, TO THE MEASURE OF THE STATURE OF THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST, 14 SO THAT WE MAY NO LONGER BE CHILDREN, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to GROW UP IN EVERY WAY INTO HIM WHO IS THE HEAD, INTO CHRIST, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes THE BODY GROW so that it builds itself up in love.

Did you notice the emphasis on growth?

We are supposed to equip the saints, and notice the repetition of the words **build up, mature, stature, no longer be children, grow.**

This is what church leaders are supposed to do.

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And this is actually where unbelievers come in, because up to this point you could be saying...

“You’ve been talking a lot about believers, what about unbelievers? How are we going to fulfill The Great Commission if we aren’t focused on unbelievers? There must be some concern for them.”^{vi}

Yes, there is. **Verse 12** says to equip the saints for the work of the ministry...and part of that ministry is sharing the gospel with unbelievers.

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Mark Dever said...

“What we need most are seeker-sensitive lives, not seeker-sensitive services.”

In other words, we need individuals who are seeker sensitive, or who go out and seek the lost.

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Let me give you an analogy...

If you’ve ever flown on a plane, they always tell you when the mask drops down, you put your mask on first and then put the mask on your children.

This is because you’re not going to be much help to your children if you’re struggling for strength and breath.

The same principle applies to the church: we’re not going to be much help to the spiritually dead if we’re barely spiritually alive.

You could say, if the church isn’t being fed the Word of God:

- How will the church live out the Word of God?
- How will the church share the Word of God with others?

Interestingly, it is in the best interest of unbelievers for the church services to focus on building up believers so they can reach the lost.

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So as we look to the future and think about the vision of WCC:

- This is why we want to equip and sanctify the saints
- Instead of being seeker sensitive.

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Let me conclude by sharing this quote from J. Delaney that summarizes things well...

*“When the church’s regular worship services are redesigned as seeker services to emphasize evangelism, the result is that the saints are hearing the gospel fifty two Sundays a year, and are not being built up in the faith. Redesigning the main church service in order to appeal to the lost is a departure from God’s plan. It may be appealing to men, it may add to the ‘numbers,’ but isn’t it a better idea to design the church and worship services after the pattern set by the One truly responsible for the increase? **THE BIBLICAL PATTERN IS THAT THE REGULAR MEETINGS OF THE CHURCH WERE PRIMARILY FOR THE BELIEVERS, NOT FOR THE LOST. WHEN THE GATHERING OF THE SAINTS WAS OVER, THEN EVANGELISM WAS TO BEGIN IN EARNEST!**”*

Let’s pray.

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ⁱ As I prepared this sermon, this verse came to mind...

Jude 1:3 Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you TO CONTEND FOR THE FAITH THAT WAS ONCE FOR ALL DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS.

We should contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints. We should be vigilant to model our church after the teaching of Scripture. Please see this as one of those important times.

ⁱⁱ I would like to be able to strictly preach about the importance of distancing our church from the world, but as some churches become more worldly and unbiblical, we must also distance ourselves from them.

Let me ask you this...

Between these two churches, which is the most threatening:

- The church that's so far off in its doctrine and practice, that it doesn't even look like a legitimate church?
- Or the church that is much closer to being biblically ordered, but is still off?

I would say the second church, because it is harder to recognize the error.

And that's the case with seeker sensitive churches, and that's why the sermon is important.

ⁱⁱⁱ [Pastor slams contemporary worship: It 'harms discipleship' | Church & Ministries | The Christian Post](#)

^{iv} I removed this part because I have shared in other sermons...

I want to share an example with you from Scripture that I believe really could've prevented Willow Creek from making this mistake...

Revelation 2 and 3 contain letters Jesus sent to 7 different churches. One of those churches is Sardis, and like Willow Creek, Sardis looked like a really thriving church. In **Rev 3:1** Jesus told Sardis: **I know your works** (they had a lot going on), **that you have a name** (or a reputation) **that you are alive, but you are dead.** The NLT says **I know ALL THE THINGS YOU DO, and that you have a reputation for being alive – but you are dead.**

When Jesus said, “**you have a name** (or a reputation) **that you are alive**” He meant they had so much going on they earned themselves a reputation for being a really thriving, happening church. Every year the list of the Most Influential Churches in America comes out and if there was a list of the Most Influential Churches in Asia Minor, Sardis would've been at the top of the list each year. But just because you have an amazing reputation as a church and everyone knows you, it doesn't mean Jesus thinks that church is alive.

It's an almost unbelievably sad irony if you think about it:

- You've got a church that everyone thinks is great, but Jesus says it's dead.
- **THEE** church everyone thinks is alive is the church Jesus says is dead.

So how could a church be **alive** and be **dead**? The answer is actually pretty simple: they looked great physically with a lot of exciting and enthusiastic things happening, but they were largely unredeemed and unregenerate, which is to say they were dead spiritually.

^v Think about something...

Romans 3:23 says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

You feel one of two ways when you hear this verse depending on whether you're a believer or an unbeliever:

- If you're a believer, you feel thankful, because you have a Savior who saved you from the punishment you deserve for having sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.
- But if you're an unbeliever you don't feel thankful.
 - You might feel angry because you're told you're a sinner, and you've always believed you're a good person.

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- Or you might feel convicted that your center, which leads you to repentance and faith in Christ But for the unbeliever who hears that they are a sinner, believes this truth, experiences conviction over their sin, repents and looks to Christ, they can be saved.

^{vi} Now there's an obvious question that might have been lingering in your minds throughout this...

- Am I saying we don't want unbelievers to come to church? We definitely want unbelievers to come to church, and I hope you're all inviting unbelievers to church.
- So the next question is: what happens when unbelievers come to church? How do we reach them?

That's a great question and there are 2 answers...

First, we preach and teach the Gospel during service...

- How many times have you heard me talk about us being sinners, needing forgiveness through Christ, we're unrighteous, our righteousness could never get us to heaven, we need the righteousness imputed by faith, etc.
- And if you're in a Bible teaching church you're going to know the Gospel better than seeker sensitive churches because they don't want to tell people the true Gospel – that you're an unrighteous sinner who needs to repent - because it might offend people.

Second, we teach God's Word and it convicts unbelievers and moves them to worship God. This is not my opinion. We have this promise in God's Word. I want to read two verses to you, but first I need to be clear about something...

We think of prophecy as predicting the future, and there are examples of that in Scripture, but primarily prophecy isn't foretelling the future, it's forth telling or proclaiming the Word of God. **1 Cor 14:3** gives us a definition of prophecy, and interestingly it says nothing about predicting the future: **he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.** Prophecy is when God works through people to proclaim His Word.

Now with that understanding of prophecy in mind, listen to what Paul says happens when there's prophecy - or proclaiming God's Word - and unbelievers are present: **1 Cor 14:24 If [there's prophecy] and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all** (he becomes convicted of his sin).

²⁵ **And thus the secrets of his heart** (what are the secrets of our heart? Our sins...) **are revealed** (that means all his evil secrets are exposed and he starts feeling REALLY bad, and guess what he does...); **and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God** (now this next part is beautiful) **and report that God is truly among you.**

The unbeliever will say, "God is here. I know He's here because He spoke to me through His Word." Now is that going to happen through shallow, superficial messages? People will walk away saying:

- *Man that pastor is so funny.*
- *Wow, he sure was entertaining.*
- *What a great storyteller.*

But I can tell you what won't happen: they will not be convicted of their sin and they will not say, "God is here!"

Now I really relate to this, because this is how I became a Christian. I went to a church that was teaching God's Word, I heard it, and I felt like God was speaking to me through it. And Katie said the same thing happened to her. It wasn't seeker sensitive: the pastor was teaching the Word and she became a believer.