



Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

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ROBERT SCHULLER AND THE SEEKER SENSITIVE CHURCH

BY BOB DEWAAY

"For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1Corinthians 1:21-24)

Two men met another man as they were walking down a road. They were having a private discussion when the third man began questioning them. The third man soon dominated the conversation. Throughout the rest of their journey, the man began with the books of Moses and proceeded to explain to them, verse by verse, all of the Old Testament passages that pertained to the Jewish Messiah. It turned out the third man was Jesus the Messiah. The resurrected Jewish Messiah had joined them on their journey and preached a sermon from Old Testament messianic prophecy. Here is how the two described their experience of this talk on the road to Emmaus: *"Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"* (Luke 24:32).

We do not have a transcription of the exact passages Jesus cited or how He explained them. Yet we have enough information in the New Testament about Messianic prophecy to reconstruct a similar sermon. Did you know that in many of the largest so-called "evangelical" churches in America such a sermon would never be tolerated? Hundreds of thousands of professed Christians go to churches where Jesus' sermon on the

road to Emmaus would be considered "irrelevant" to the "felt needs" of the congregation. The hearts of churchgoers no longer "burn" in conviction, joy, or intense devotion to God and His Word, because it is seldom heard. If the pastor of one of these churches announced a sermon that would outline all of the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah, the likely result would be yawns, moans, and bewilderment over how the church lost its "vision," or mass exodus to a church that understood the "needs" of modern "seekers."

How did we get to this situation? I credit Robert Schuller as the key person to have orchestrated this previously unimaginable change in evangelical Christianity. It was Schuller's bold move, beginning in 1955, to integrate the positive thinking philosophy of Norman Vincent Peale with savvy, business oriented marketing techniques that brought thousands into what eventually became the Crystal Cathedral. In the process he also developed his hugely successful television broadcast. Though he did not coin the phrase "seeker-sensitive," his success and ideas have inspired many of the most successful "seeker" churches in America.

ROBERT SCHULLER AND OLD FASHIONED LIBERALISM

Robert Schuller does not claim to be a liberal. He still is affiliated with a Reformed denomination¹ and willingly calls himself "evangelical." Yet when Schuller appeared on Larry King Live just before Christmas 1999, I heard him proclaim, "I am not trying to convert anyone from another religion, I am only try to reach people who have no religion." If so, he has just ruled out billions of people as possible recipients of the gospel. The vast majority of Americans claim to be Christian and most of the rest claim some religion. So also the majority of the people throughout the world have some religious affiliation. The idea that one ought not try to convert others to the Christian faith is liberal to the core.

Dr. Schuller has other things in common with religious liberalism. In 1982, Schuller wrote a book claiming that the church needed to be reformed based on the psychological theory of self-esteem.² He has often been quoted as suggesting that Christian theology ought to be more man-centered rather than God-centered. As we shall show, Schuller's teachings have their roots in early twentieth century liberalism. Many people know that Norman Vincent Peale was a key person in the development of Robert Schuller's ministry, but most do not know the roots of Peale's and after him Schuller's approach to Christianity.

In his book, *Your Church Has a Fantastic Future*,³ Dr. Schuller describes how he started with \$500 and a dream. Eventually he built the Crystal Cathedral and his multimillion dollar Television ministry. He rented a drive in theater in 1955 and began to take Dr.

Norman Vincent Peale's message of positive thinking to the people. He writes:

Then I proceeded to spend about \$50 for brochures. Hoping to impress unchurched people, I wrote to Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, who wrote back a marvelous statement with his permission to quote extensively. So I grabbed hold of his coat-tails.⁴

In 1957 he persuaded Peale to speak at his drive in church.⁵ From Peale he learned a key lesson about appealing to the "unchurched." The lesson was, "Jesus never called a person a sinner."⁶ This insight led to Schuller's philosophy of possibility thinking and self-esteem. Schuller writes: "[P]ossibility thinking and self-esteem theology can both be summarized in this single sentence: The 'I am' determines the 'I can.'"⁷ His idea was that the key to making positive thinking work out practically was to develop high self-esteem. He imagines that people do not realize their full potential because of low self-esteem.

Dr. Schuller usually does not come out and deny any key evangelical beliefs. He says that he believes in the various points of orthodoxy. He even interacts with his critics who claim he skips essential aspects of the gospel. For example, when someone questions him on not preaching that we must deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus, he is ready with an explanation that possibility thinking is doing just that: "To deny yourself means daring to ask God, 'What do you want me to do?'"⁸ This sets in motion God's answer. Eventually the question leads to this: "[Y]ou're going to get a dream. And anytime a dream comes from God, it is going to be humanly impossible to accomplish."⁹ This all leads to his version of "faith" and success through possibility thinking and self-esteem. So through this clever process, taking up one's cross and denying self actually means letting God make you more successful than you ever thought possible and having high self-esteem. He then goes on to scold those of us who still think that Jesus' point is

that the cross is an instrument of death and that we must die to our old sinful self. He claims such preaching produces "sick people."¹⁰

Similarly, Dr. Schuller is ready with versions of the 10 Commandments and other Biblical issues that fit his theology. This is Schuller's nice, user friendly version of the decalogue: "The answer is simple. The Ten Commandments are given to us in order to show us how to live in such an ethical behavioral pattern that we will feel good about ourselves. The Ten Commandments are not 10 negative restrictions."¹¹ The sin nature gets a similar treatment. While not denying its existence, Dr. Schuller defines sin as a lack of faith. Our sin is that, "We're conceived and born without faith, without any belief."¹² So we need faith, and most importantly we need to believe in ourselves (and God of course). Since Dr. Schuller publicly claims to not seek the conversion of people from other religions, obviously faith in God need not be described in Christian terms. So whatever issue comes along, possibility thinking and self-esteem have the answer.

THE LEGACY AND ROOTS OF DR. SCHULLER'S IDEAS

Having settled these issues, the rest of the book tells us how to be successful and concludes with testimonies of dozens of successful pastors who got their church growth ideas from Dr. Schuller. C. Peter Wagner, a key promoter of modern church growth theory, sings the praises of Dr. Schuller in the preface of the book.¹³ Bill Hybels, the pastor of the now famous Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois, is among many notables who claim to at least partially owe their success to Schuller's principles. According to Hybels' testimony, he got his inspiration from one of Dr. Schuller's church growth seminars.¹⁴

It is undeniable that Robert Schuller started a trend that grew into a huge movement that is now engulfing much of evangelicalism. I know from personal experience that evangelical seminaries are promoting the latest seeker-sensitive approaches to church

growth as if it were a do or die situation. During the last seven years, I sat through many classes and seminars promoting this approach. In preparation for this article I ran a search on the seminary library computer and found 400 books on the topic. As I paged through dozens of these books I encountered a confusing array of opinions. One book said that one should never call the church "the family of God" since families are closed units and people will not feel welcome. Then another said that young wandering souls are looking for a sense of family. Another suggested that if a church is going to ever have over 200 members, the pastor must make it clear from the beginning that he will do no hospital visitation, personal counseling, or personal, pastoral care of the members. His role is to build a team, with him as the manager.

Though confusing, there is a unifying theme: in America, nothing succeeds like success. When I was in Bible college in the 1970's, the visiting speakers were often the latest successful pastors whose churches grew to 2,000. Many at that time succeeded by buying a fleet of old school buses and going around town offering to bring people's kids to Sunday School so the parents could sleep in. We were expected to listen in envy of the glorious success of these contemporary church growth heroes. Soon the whole bus ministry thing became passé and something else took its place. When I went back to seminary, eighteen years after graduating from Bible college, I was confronted with a whole new generation of super-star pastors to emulate. These new heroes have found a new key, the "unchurched" are "seekers" who will come if the service is "relevant."

The year I graduated from seminary (1999) I heard a young pastor in chapel who had managed to start a new congregation from scratch and had come back to tell us of his success. His message was entitled "Thinking Outside the Box." Supposedly Jesus was good at thinking outside the box (notice the similarity to "possibility thinking"). The way this young man practiced his theory, was that he had a Sunday morning service with

coffee tables and coffee. Those who come to the meeting view clips of Hollywood movies and discuss what point they think the movie is trying to make. Schuller got his start in a drive in movie theater preaching possibility thinking and look at his success. Maybe this young man is on to something!

What I think is this: most of those jumping on this modern bandwagon do not realize that this is simply old-fashioned liberalism. Sadly, some probably do know this and simply do not care. We shall see this by examining the roots of the movement.

THE HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK CONNECTION

After the modernist controversy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a huge upheaval in American Christianity. The modernists denied the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. Those who opposed them were called "Fundamentalists," so named after a document called "The Fundamentals." These were simply the basics of the Christian faith that had been believed since the time of the apostles. Creation versus evolution was a key issue, but not the only one. Even the deity and resurrection of Christ were questioned. What emerged from this was the birth of many denominations we now know as "evangelical." On the other hand, liberals took control of the seminaries and headquarters of most of the older, main-line denominations.

A key modernist of the early twentieth century who was perhaps the most successful of all liberals (at that time) in gaining a national audience was Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick was able to take his liberal message to the masses at a time when most modernists were fighting behind the scenes battles to control denominations and their seminaries. Several historians have commented on this. For example, Leonard Sweet writes, "Suffice it to say that while a few modernist preachers like Harry Emerson Fosdick, Norman Vincent Peale, Ralph Sockman, and Robert Schuller pioneered in the use of mass communications media (radio, television, publishing

ventures, computer mailings, etc.), by and large modernist clergy were content to remain inky-fingered, acting as if the communications revolution had never taken place."¹⁵

Fosdick strongly believed in his modernism and was willing to battle for it. He fought battles in the Presbyterian and Northern Baptist denominations on behalf of modernism against fundamentalism.¹⁶ In the midst of the modernist controversy in the Presbyterian church, Fosdick wrote an article in the New York Times rebutting a previous article by William Jennings Bryan that had called evolution "unscientific and irreligious."¹⁷ Fosdick promoted the theory of evolution. He soon after preached his most famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"¹⁸ Fosdick's point was to say that the fundamentalists could not "drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration."¹⁹ This was a key shot fired in the fundamentalist-modernist war. Fosdick was eventually driven out of the Presbyterian pulpit, but this was merely the beginning of his successful career.

After other battles, and with the considerable financial help of John D. Rockefeller, Fosdick established the interdenominational Riverside Church in New York.²⁰

A key question that comes to mind is: if you no longer believe in the inspiration of Scripture, what do you preach? Fosdick had no problems with finding sermon topics. For one thing, he did not deny everything in the Bible. He had his own way of believing it. As is typical with liberalism, rather than believing the Bible is the word of God, he believed it contained the word of God.²¹ So the Bible is still useful, but the preacher evidently decides which parts are useful. Fosdick believed in the resurrection, for he wrote "I believe in Christ, his deity,

his sacrificial saviorhood, his resurrected and triumphant life, his rightful Lordship. . ."²² This sounds good, until one finds out that he did not believe in Christ's bodily resurrection which the New Testament writers so steadfastly affirmed as necessary to the faith. Fosdick said, "I believe in the persistence of personality, but I do not believe in the resurrection of the flesh."²³ The following explanation by Fosdick's biographer is enlightening:

Fosdick could not believe that Jesus was virgin born. He did not ridicule those who did, but he was adamant that such belief was not essential to acceptance of Christian faith. . . . Fosdick doubted whether Jesus ever thought of himself as the Messiah; perhaps he did, but more probably "Jesus' disciples may have read this into his thinking. . ."²⁴

The modernist can still preach about God, Christ, faith, and even make use of the Bible. The key is to center the message on human needs and understand Christian ministry as a

PREVIOUS GENERATIONS OF EVANGELICALS THOUGHT THE KEY CATEGORIES WERE "SAVED AND LOST." NOW THEY ARE "CHURCHED AND UNCHURCHED."

"helping profession."

To this end, psychology is a key aspect of Christian ministry for the liberal or modernist preacher. Historian Glenn T. Miller sees religious liberalism as one source of the professional approach to religious education. He writes, "American religious liberalism was dissatisfied with traditional pastoral care."²⁵ This led to the, "understanding of the minister as an advisor on life's way. . ."²⁶ Glenn Miller provides the following insight into Fosdick's role in this:

Harry Emerson Fosdick in the North, and Theodore Adams in the South, incorporated counseling into their ministries.

Both Adams and Fosdick consulted psychologists and psychiatrists, served their churches as counselors, and, more importantly, used psychological insights in their widely imitated preaching.²⁷

So for modernists, helping people along the way with whatever means are available through the culture is a key to preaching and ministry. As for Fosdick and the Fundamentalists, Fosdick wrote "We won our battle."²⁸ His biographer, Robert Moats Miller shares an interesting insight on this matter:

[He] was correct only in the limited sense that the liberals were not driven from the churches. I may very well be that for tens of millions in every era Fosdick's liberalism could never adequately answer the terrors of human existence. Nevertheless, when he added, "it was one of the most necessary theological battles every fought," he was right on the money, for millions found in his evangelical liberalism the only religious answer possible for them.²⁹

Robert Moats Miller wrote his biography on Fosdick from the perspective of an admirer. His understanding that there were many who needed Fosdick's approach as "the only religious answer possible" is a key point. It likely is based on the fact that once one accepts a supposedly true theory of evolution and a historically and scientifically flawed Bible, one must either reject Christian religion or find a way to change its essence so that is no longer conflicts with the modernist understanding of the "facts." Fosdick provided a way to simultaneously hold to liberal assumptions and still have a version of the Christian religion. Norman Vincent Peale, whom Fosdick knew and admired,³⁰ carried on a similar version of liberalism geared for the mass media. Peale's profound influence on Schuller is often attested by Dr. Schuller himself.

Robert Schuller has followed in the footsteps of Peale and Fosdick and provided a religious approach for those who normally would reject traditional Christian theology. He often has said (when asked about his version of church and Christianity) that he is a last stop for those for whom all other approaches have not worked. People will come to his church who have given up on church (or as he recently said on religion). Of course, the unspoken assumption is that the reason Biblical Christianity does not "work" for many, is that they refuse to believe its message. Schuller's approach puts aside the message that is so undesirable to many modern religious consumers and replaces it with self-esteem and possibility thinking. This is squarely in the liberal tradition of having little to say about eternal judgment, the blood atonement, or the bodily resurrection of Christ, but having loads to say about how one can have a better life in this world.

WHAT IS GAINED?

If Robert Moats Miller was right that Fosdick's liberal approach is the "only religious answer possible" for some, then Schuller and the his new legions of pastoral followers are the current providers of that answer. Others have noticed this. For example, David Wells writes:

His [Harry Emerson Fosdick's] theology of the person was built on the ideas of the immanence of God in human personality and the perfectibility of human nature. He spoke enthusiastically of the unlimited inner potential that only had to be found and cultivated. . . . From Fosdick the ideas traveled to Norman Vincent Peale and then to Robert Schuller, and now they have become commonplace throughout much of the evangelical world.³¹

The reason that the modernist approach is deemed the last ditch, possible answer for those who flock to what are now called "seeker sensitive"

churches, is that so many contemporary people refuse to accept the Biblical answers to their questions.

Human potential as understood in Schuller's twin foundations of self-esteem and possibility thinking is an alternative to the cross, not an expression of it as Schuller's theological legerdemain would make us think. The Biblical message of the cross speaks of human depravity, the wrath of God against sin, the need for substitutionary atonement and the bodily resurrection from the dead unto either eternal life or eternal damnation. This is not a message of the unlimited potential of humans through positive thinking. "Seekers" as they are now mislabeled, are those who, according to Schuller himself, are not going to accept the two millennia old message of Biblical Christianity. But they will come to church under the right conditions.

This is what ties the modern seeker movement to historical liberalism. The goal is to get people to be "churched" even though the inspiration of Scripture and the whole counsel of God (*Acts 20:27*) are set aside. The Bible only "contains" the word of God and the preacher is at liberty to ignore any Scripture that does not fit his purpose of church growth and religious success. Dr. Schuller has adamantly rejected any idea that he is obligated to preach everything in the Bible. Does he believe in a literal hell? This is very difficult to determine because one never hears him preach about it. At least Fosdick came out in public with all his beliefs and stood by them. Schuller is more of a politician, keeping a smile and a handshake always ready while skirting controversial questions. Schuller's approach to his modernism has done what Fosdick's could never do: brought evangelicals and liberals together.

The liberals of the 1920's never thought of Schuller's brilliant move. Rather than deny any Biblical doctrines and thus rile the ranks of the traditionalists and believers in Biblical inerrancy, let the doctrines die the death of neglect. Keep the congregation so enamored with brilliant homilies on "Five Ways to Deal with Stress in the

Workplace" and "Nine Ways to Envision a Brighter Future" and they will never think about such matters as the wrath of God, eternal judgment, atonement, or heaven and hell. Does anyone seem to care whether Dr. Schuller and his hordes of evangelical copy cats really believe any of these doctrines? For decades liberals have claimed that most New Testament doctrines are irrelevant. Judging by how many modern evangelicals go to churches where doctrine is considered passé, contemporary evangelicals must have decided the liberals were right.

CONCLUSION

The greatest problem with all of this is that we have radically changed the key categories in the minds of the contemporary evangelical church. For example, previous generations of evangelicals thought the key categories were "saved and lost." Now they are "churched and unchurched." When I came to Christ in Iowa in 1971, nearly everyone in our community was "churched." At that time Bible believing Christians understood there to be two categories of people, the saved and the lost. Whether or not one was in church was immaterial. I grew up in a church that gave lip service to the facts of Christianity, but was told by a pastor when I was 16 years old that these were in fact false. There was no creation of the world out of nothing, no miracles, no virgin birth, and no bodily resurrection from the dead. Christianity

and the Bible were there to help us live a better life. Not realizing what the categories were, I found myself in the middle of modernism and liberalism. My response was to exit the church immediately. Being "churched," in my mind was quite worthless if none of the things churches supposedly existed to promote were true.

So as a new Christian four years later, I realized that the problem was that we had churches full of lost people who would go to hell if they did not hear the gospel, believe and repent. Nothing could be clearer. Many churches were pastored by individuals who were themselves unregenerate. That is the legacy that the fundamentalist/modernist battle had left. As Fosdick pointed out, the modernists stayed in most of the churches and controlled the seminaries. They won the battle in most old line denominations. Consequently, when people like I was in 1971 came to Christ, we never considered going back to those denominations. We were hungry for God's word and wanted to be challenged week by week to grow into conformity to Christ's purposes.

Thus it is with great alarm and sorrow that I write this article. Masses of churches and denominations who once were proud to have left the modernists behind and went out on their own to promote Biblical orthodoxy have now either wittingly or unwittingly joined the modernists. The categories that I now hear, not occasionally, but constantly in evangelical circles, are "churched and

unchurched." Evidently it is assumed that since we call ourselves "evangelical" (like Schuller) we have something to offer. If people are in our churches they are imagined to be better off than if they are not, regardless of whether or not they are being confronted with God's word and His holy claims on their lives. This assumption is false. As in my personal experience, unregenerates are often further from the gospel when they are "churched" but not hearing God's word than when they are "unchurched." At least in the later condition they know they are not Christian. False assurance is worse than no assurance. "Seekers" are really unsaved sinners who may never find out they are unsaved sinners because they are becoming so adept at dealing with stress in the workplace through the help of the savvy, therapeutically oriented pastor. When life seems to be getting better with a little help from the church, who needs to concern oneself with heaven and hell, especially if one is never told they exist.

We must return to the only means that God has ordained for bringing salvation to the lost. It is outlined in the verses cited at the beginning of the article. It is the message of the cross: "[B]ut we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1Corinthians 1:23,24).



GOD'S VESSELS OF SALVATION

Trusting the "Foolishness" of God

BY RYAN HABBENA

Through the world's eyes, surely Noah looked to be quite the fool. For 100 years he constructed a gigantic ark on dry land. While he did this he called people to repentance, for the Scriptures proclaim he was a "preach-

er of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). I imagine Noah was subjected to a plethora of insults, scorn, and ridicule. However, he remained steadfast in his obedience to God; faithfully carrying out all God commanded him. God's "vessel of salvation" was seen by the world as complete foolishness in the days of Noah. It is no different today.

The ark saved Noah and his family from God's wrath upon sin. Noah's ark is a type of the ultimate "vessel of salvation" - the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is God's "vessel of salvation" to all who

will place themselves under its shelter. Just as the ark was ridiculed by the world as foolishness, the Gospel is also. 1 Corinthians 1:18 proclaims: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Sadly, many in Evangelicalism are now accommodating the world's response.

THE NEW "PRACTICAL" GOSPEL

The word "gospel" literally means good news. The good news preached in the

Scriptures is that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). However, today a subtle, new gospel is taking its place. Instead of preaching "Jesus can save you from your sins," the new message is: "Jesus can save you from your problems." Sin, the wrath of God, hell, and other truths of Scripture are by very nature offensive to the unregenerate, and thus drive many people away from the church. Since the "church growth theory" has replaced obedience to God's word as the driving force behind many Evangelical churches, preaching the pure Gospel has been found to be a hindrance to perceived success. Thus, in order to be inoffensive to the unbelieving "seekers" who visit, practical principles are extracted from the Scriptures.¹ This provides a comfortable environment for the unbelieving "seeker," and thus the numbers within the church grow.

It is certainly true that Jesus is "wisest of the wise" and gives wonderful practical advice. Scripture indeed holds a wealth of wisdom. When the whole counsel of God is preached, the believer will become equipped with all that is necessary for Christian living. However, the glaring problem with *only* preaching the practical wisdom of Scripture is it neglects the true Gospel, which is the foundation of all these things. Everything is for naught if the primary reason for the coming of Christ, "to seek and to save that which was lost," (Luke 19:10) is never preached, and therefore never accepted. Replacing the Gospel (which cuts to heart of mankind's most serious problem) with preaching strictly superficial practical advice is equivalent to driving a heart attack victim to the Dairy Queen instead of the hospital. Sure the ice cream may taste good, but there is a much more pressing issue at hand.

In this disturbing downward trend, the hard truths that are essential to the very nature of the Gospel, such as the wrath of God, sin, and the atonement are not preached, or at best given in small doses over a long period of time. Therefore, the heart of the Christian faith has been all but removed in order to appeal to a modern worldly culture. For instance, one proponent of this trend notes the central focus of their weekend services. He states: "On the weekends

we focus on a three-part grid. We ask ourselves: Is this real? Is this relevant? Is this rockin'?"² He continues to note that the service is made "real" by watching movie or television clips, and made "relevant" by playing secular music. This well illustrates how the focus has been gravely misplaced in many modern Evangelical churches. The most essential question is being ignored: "Does it produce *repentance*?"

THE POWER OF THE PURE GOSPEL

1 Corinthians 15 gives, in my estimation, the most succinct presentation of the pure Gospel. Paul declares: "For I delivered unto you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3,4). Notice that Paul did not appeal to their superficial problems in trying to present the Gospel to them. Rather, he declared the Gospel to them "of first importance!" He also admonished the Corinthians that if they did not hold fast these truths that they "have believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2).

Why was Paul so insistent on preserving the pure Gospel? It was because, as a minister of the Gospel, he knew that it was the only message able to save souls. It was the only message that produced true repentance. He was so aware of this when he preached the Gospel to the Corinthians, he proclaimed:

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. (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

Paul knew the Gospel was the power of God unto salvation. He was so aware of this that he preached the Gospel plainly, in much fear and trembling, so that he would not interfere with its pure, God-

ordained message. In his book, *Ashamed of the Gospel*,³ John MacArthur comments: "Inherent in the Gospel message is the power of an omnipotent God. That power alone is sufficient to save the vilest sinner and transform the hardest heart - apart from any human arguments, illustrations, or ingenuity."⁴ Paul knew it was the message that was of utmost importance - not the medium. Few today tremble at the responsibility of conveying the pure message of the Gospel.

TRUSTING THE "FOOLISHNESS" OF GOD

Noah trusted and obeyed God's means of salvation, even though it was ridiculed as foolishness. We do well if we learn from Noah's example. For "by faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

In God's word, success is not judged in numbers. Noah preached to the world's inhabitants and didn't produce a single convert, save his family. In many contemporary Evangelical circles Noah would be told give it up, or find a different method, because whatever he was doing was just not working. On the contrary, however, true success lies in trusting and obeying God and His commands, no matter what the cost.

Preaching the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ may indeed bring about ridicule, insults, and accusations of being "out of touch." Yet, those who are redeemed can indeed see the power and wisdom in the "foolishness" of God. Just as the ark was the only "vessel of salvation" in the days of Noah, so will be the Gospel on the Day of Judgment. Therefore, let all of God's servants not shrink back from preaching the pure message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21b).



A USER'S GUIDE TO SEEKER SENSITIVE RELIGIOUS TERMINOLOGY

BY BOB DEWAAY

Since modern evangelicals have taken to using professional pollsters, focus groups, demographic analysis, and other marketing "tools of the trade" to foster church growth, it has been discovered that many common religious words are a "turn off" to would be seekers. Therefore, a new set of religious terms has been developed for the use of the market savvy, evangelical pastor. *The following is a "tongue in cheek," though sadly quite realistic, user's guide to seeker sensitive religious terminology.* Terms defined elsewhere in the guide are in **bold**.

ATONEMENT: This is too technical and too threatening. Claiming that people need atonement implies that God is angry at sin and that He has wrath that needs to be appeased. These ideas are irrelevant or offensive to seekers. Try this: "at-one-ment"; seekers don't mind being "at one" with a higher power.

BIBLE: This is a book that **fundamentalists** carry to church with them. Seekers do not like to be preached "at" from these. If you feel the need to refer to the Bible, use stories from the Bible to inspire people, but avoid **doctrine** and anything that might be controversial.

BLOOD: The blood atonement is offensive to seekers. Mentioning blood is disturbing to many seekers and sounds too archaic. A God who demands blood as a payment for sin seems ominous and threatening. Many modern seekers are animal rights activists so don't mention that God required the blood of animals to be sacrificed in the Old Testament, this will drive them away. Try talking about **love** instead.

CHRIST: Do not be afraid to speak about Christ. This term is innocuous to seekers as long as you don't make any exclusive claims or explain who He is in terms of the virgin birth or the **blood atonement**. If you mention Christ often without any further explanation, seekers will not be

offended. Let them imagine Christ however they want to.

CHURCH: Many seekers have had negative experiences with churches. The term is rather old fashioned. Try "Christian Center" (like "shopping center") or even better, a name with no Christian connotations.

COMMANDMENTS: Seekers do not like to be commanded to do, believe, or abstain from anything. Seekers would rather be invited than commanded. For example, rather than commanding seekers to obey God, invite them to enjoy a more fulfilling life. Which would you rather hear, ten commandments or ten invitations to personal happiness?

THE CROSS: The cross is OK as long as it is a gold plated, Christian symbol. Many seekers enjoy wearing them as jewelry. Though perhaps a bit old fashioned, crosses do not usually offend seekers. However, if you preach on the cross in terms of the **blood atonement** and explain that seekers must embrace the cross, die to self, and trust fully in Christ's substitutionary death, this will offend them.

DAMNATION: You have got to be kidding! Don't even think about mentioning this.

DOCTRINE: Nothing drives seekers away quicker than doctrine. The very term sounds stodgy, dogmatic, and narrow minded. Doctrine is so passé that no seeker sensitive pastor should use the term or teach it. People are interested in practical matters and nothing is less relevant to them than Christian doctrine.

ELECTION See **damnation**.

EVANGELICAL: This term is usable. Even the greatest seeker sensitive pastor of all time, Robert Schuller, uses it. As long as you do not define it as excluding anyone, there is no harm in using it. Also, people calling themselves this deny many Biblical doctrines and remain popular. So why shouldn't a seeker church that teaches no **doctrine** at all use it?

EVIDENCE: This is not important to post-modern seekers. Evidence sounds too

much like a trial, or like a search for truth. Seekers do not want to make decisions about truth and error, or right and wrong, they just want to experience life. Seekers would rather hear inspiring stories than to hear rational proofs.

FATHER GOD: Do not use the term "Father" when referring to God. Seekers prefer gender neutral terminology. Many seekers had bad experiences with their earthly fathers and so they cannot relate to God if He is a Father. Try terms like God, deity, higher power, divine being or even **Christ**.

FEAR OF GOD: This phrase cannot be used around seekers. Seekers have a negative image of any religion that teaches that God is to be feared. Fear is a definite turn off to seekers and implies that God is Judge. Seekers do not like to think about authority figures who may be displeased with them.

FUNDAMENTALIST: This is a great term to use to describe anyone who disagrees with the seeker sensitive approach. It sounds something like "terrorist bomber" and will send your critics heading for cover. At all costs, make sure everyone knows you are not one of these and always use it to describe people who insist on preaching from the **Bible** or who resist your agenda.

GOSPEL: Since the term means "good news" it works with seekers, as long as you don't let on there is any bad news (see **damnation**). The tried and true gospel for seekers, proven by Robert Schuller himself, is the gospel of self-esteem. Seekers are always wanting to hear good news about how they can have more self-esteem.

HELL: Obviously this word should not be used. There is a difference of opinion about how to deal with this matter. Some have opted to deny its existence and teach annihilationism or universalism. Others substitute the phrase "Christless eternity" and leave it to seekers to imagine what that might mean.

HOLINESS: Seekers are very turned off by this term. It sounds ominous and likely to provoke feelings of guilt. Don't use it at all.

JUDGEMENT: On the eternal type, see hell. Judgement is also something seekers should never be subjected to. In another sense, judgements are something people should be urged not to make. Post-modern seekers hate judgements and judgmentalism more than anything.

LOVE: There you go! This is the one topic you should always dwell on. But, be careful — remember that seekers do not like being commanded to do anything. So don't command them to love God and neighbor (see **Bible**) but invite them to experience love. Everyone wants to be loved. Most important of all, always remind seekers that they need to love themselves more, self-love resonates with seekers.

REASON: See **evidence**. Seekers do not like to think, they like stories and uplifting anecdotes.

REPENTANCE: Seekers often come from dysfunctional, shame-based homes. The idea of repentance brings back feelings of

shame that will turn them away; so never mention it.

REVERENCE: This term is a turn off for seekers. Try "relevance."

SIN: This is a very negative term that is seen by seekers to be **judgmental**, shaming, and holier than thou. However, since something obviously is wrong in the world and people's lives are not what they would like, another term is needed to explain the problem. Use "low self-esteem" whenever you normally would use "sin."

SINNERS: Never, ever refer to seekers as "sinners." Why do you think we call them "seekers"?

TRUTH: The most important thing to remember is "all truth is God's truth." Once that is established, everything can be lumped into the category of truth and no one will question you. Seekers do not care whether an idea is true anyhow, they are more concerned about how it makes them feel or if it seems to work.

WORSHIP: Though some seeker churches still use this term, many do not. It sounds old-fashioned and religious. It implies bowing before a **holy** God, which is definitely something seekers are not prone to do. A better term is "celebration." Seekers love to celebrate. You can invite them to "celebrate life" and thus create a positive feeling without any Christian connotations.

This users guide is not exhaustive. However, the astute seeker-sensitive pastor should be able to use these basic principles and make wise decisions on any other matter that may come up. The basic idea is tell people what they want to hear. If you do it well, they will come in droves.



END NOTES

"ROBERT SCHULLER AND THE SEEKER SENSITIVE CHURCH"

1. The Reformed Church of America
2. Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, (Waco, Word Books, 1982). See Bob DeWaay, *Self-esteem, the New Christian "Virtue"* Part 2, in Critical Issues Commentary, Issue 18, November, 1993; for a critique of this book and Schuller's self-esteem philosophy.
3. Robert Schuller, *Your Church as a Fantastic Future*, (Ventura: Regal Books, 1986).
4. Ibid. 29.
5. Ibid. 30.
6. Ibid. 115.
7. Ibid. 117.
8. Ibid. 122.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. 123.
11. Ibid. 124.
12. Ibid. 120.
13. Ibid. 15-17.
14. Ibid. 227,228.
15. Leonard I. Sweet, "The Modernization of Protestant Religion in America" in *Altered Landscapes*, David W. Lotz ed.,

- (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1989) 28.
16. Robert Moats Miller, "Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) see chapters 8 and 9, 112-173.
 17. Ibid. 115.
 18. Ibid.
 19. Quoted by Miller, Ibid. 115.
 20. Ibid. 211-222.
 21. Ibid. 403.
 22. Quoted by Miller, Ibid.129.
 23. Quoted by Miller, Ibid. 411.
 24. Ibid. 409.
 25. Glenn T. Miller, "Professionals and Pedagogues: A Survey of Theological Education," in Op. Cit. Lotz, 196.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Ibid. 196, 197.
 28. Quoted from Fosdick, Robert Moats Miller, 173.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Ibid. 560.
 31. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 178.

"GOD'S VESSELS OF SALVATION: TRUSTING THE 'FOOLISHNESS' OF GOD"

- 1 This is often how many churches rationalize their methods. As long as they strictly preach the non-offensive, "practical" portions of Scripture, they still may call themselves "Biblical."
- 2 Tim Celek, "A Look at a Seeker-Centered Church" in, *Make Room For the Boom . . . or Bust*, Gary L. McIntosh, ed., (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997), 76.
- 3 John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993) This book critiques the current "user-friendly" movement and addresses many of the biblical and practical problems that arise from this trend. It is highly recommended.
- 4 Ibid., 129.

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