

Mike Cook  
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Dear Oak Grove Leadership,

I thought there were many good things in Pastor Larry's recent draft of a 5-year plan for Oak Grove. However, one major caution I have involves the statements "Today's culture needs choices. The more choices we can give them the more people we can reach." This caution was especially reinforced after Larry mentioned his recent conference in Dallas and the one or more sessions on Rick Warren's "Purpose Driven Church" growth model. Warren's book discusses what he believes are the five purposes of the local church: worship, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and evangelism.

I don't object to church growth and would like to see Oak Grove grow larger so it can reach more people. I do, however, object to some of the methods of church growth being used today, in particular, the contemporary worship service and "seeker sensitive" services.

By "choice", I wonder whether Larry means adding a contemporary service with contemporary music and other types of activities used in many contemporary services at several prominent churches in the U.S. I hope that I'm wrong on this point.

Larry may be intending something different, and that's certainly a topic to be discussed by Oak Grove leadership. Following are some of my concerns and cautions.

Having a vision for the future of the congregation is good. It would be good to have a cohesive plan for the various ministries at Oak Grove. A scatter-shot approach to programs, with a hit-or-miss outcome, can cause too much effort and resources to be misspent.

Having a visitation program, knocking on doors to invite people to church, and some other related efforts of outreach are fine, too.

But we must be careful how we present ourselves to unbelievers and the unchurched. We must not dilute the gospel message in order to attract people. We cannot allow ourselves to misrepresent God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit just to reach people. We can't look like the world in order to attract the world. I hope we agree on this. However, I'm concerned that "choice" in worship services will lead to just that kind of dilution and misrepresentation.

I am concerned that Warren's method of church growth, as well as some other popular models, seems to be a consumer sales/marketing/management approach to church growth. What the congregation wants is what drives what they get. People's "felt needs" become more important than hearing what they need to hear: the gospel. This approach can easily make "relevance" more important than biblical teaching. We can't just try to please people or cater to their desires. They may want their ears to be tickled (2 Timothy 4:3-4), but we can't compromise the message of the gospel or accommodate people who don't really have a desire to learn more about God. Pragmatism (giving people what they want, and doing what it takes to bring in people) should not drive church growth. We can't ignore the needs of people, but we can't overlook biblical teaching while meeting needs.

Warren has some good points to consider: loving people, helping them during trials, etc. But I think some of his methods are questionable. Warren says not to compromise the gospel message, but in practice it seems as though it would be very easy to lose sight of biblical fundamentals.

We need to be careful not to confuse worship and evangelism. Both are important to a church. But worship services for believers must not become evangelism sessions for unbelievers. Unbelievers, by definition, are not coming to church to worship Jesus Christ. Worship services are a time for believers to worship and exalt God, to be encouraged, to be exhorted, to be edified, and so on.

The time for evangelism is outside of a Sunday morning worship service for believers.

A Sunday morning service should include preaching the whole gospel, not a feel-good, informal, diluted message without presentation of sin, judgment, repentance, redemption, Christ, the Cross, the Resurrection, etc. It should not be a time of entertainment or amusement for people who want to be in a church but who don't want to be bothered or made uncomfortable by all that "God stuff." We must not design a worship service to just attract unbelievers; that's not what a worship service is for.

Instead of following a contemporary or seeker sensitive format, it would be better for a worship service to follow the Acts 2:42 model: present the apostles' teaching, enjoy fellowship together in the gospel, take the Lord's Communion together, and pray as a congregation. Congregational singing of worthy music should also be included. The apostles' teaching includes teaching the doctrine of the New Testament (sin, redemption, Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection, etc.), teaching Christ's commands, and rejecting false teachers and doctrine.

The message of the cross is offensive; unbelievers don't want to hear it. We cannot be inoffensive to unbelievers and the unchurched. Although Jesus attracted lots (multitudes) of listeners, when given the truth many of those followers of Jesus abandoned Him, instead of His group of followers expanding (John 6:66). *"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. ... But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;"* (1 Corinthians 1:18,23)

[As a side note, the term "seeker-sensitive service" is not fully clear to me, although I think I know what most people mean. What does "seeker sensitive" really mean? What are seekers really seeking? Unbelievers are not naturally seeking Christ. I assume the seeker is not the one to be sensitive, but how are believers to be sensitive to unbelievers? We can't compromise the message of the gospel. We can't become worldly so as to befriend them on their own terms. How much give-and-take should there be between seekers and believers? If someone is truly seeking Christ, we must help them with their understanding without allowing them to believe that they can stay the way they are.]

Having traditional and contemporary services can split church congregations. By having these dramatically different types of services, a church also shows that it is compromising the message of the gospel. There will eventually be a tendency to move the traditional service towards a contemporary style. Rick Warren essentially says that those who aren't going to go along with his approach should find another church.

We must not become subject to the world's way of doing things and entertaining people just to get them to hear about Jesus and the Bible. It seems almost like a "bait and switch" tactic; it is deceptive to get people in the church on some alluring pretense, and hit them with the gospel when they're not expecting it. We can't afford to assimilate popular worldly culture into the church just to bring people through the doors. *"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye*

*transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Romans 12:2)*

We should hold to a higher standard than the world. We are not supposed to lower the standard, but to bring people up to the standard. Our standard is the life of Jesus Christ. We can't meet that standard on our own, but the goal is to reach to the standard through the help of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, prayer, and so on. Holding to a higher standard is not legalism, but an attempt to follow God's teachings. We shouldn't excuse people when they fail to try to live to a higher standard. Jesus does want us to "come as you are", but that does not mean "remain as you are".

Preaching, with personal evangelism, is the biblical way to present the gospel. *“And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 10:7) “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.” (Matthew 24:14) “And they went out, and preached that men should repent.” (Mark 6:12) “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:47) “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.” (Acts 8:4)* Many other verses could be referenced, also.

Why preaching? Because it, too, is foolishness. It is not flashy, or glitzy, or amusing, or entertaining, or the preferred method that most people would choose to have something important presented to them. Preaching strives to present Christ, not a man-centered spectacle. The presentation of the gospel should not get in the way of the gospel message. *“For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:17-18)*

Paul did not preach with the wisdom of words so as to impress people with any oratorical skills. The Greeks especially liked to listen to fancy speeches and fine rhetoric, but Paul knew that was not the way to present the gospel. *“For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” (1 Corinthians 1:21) “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)*

Some claim that to reach people for Christ, we are allowed to do many things because Paul wrote about being all things to all people. But I believe that this passage is often misunderstood. After writing more about preaching, Paul states *“For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)*

When he was with Jews, he acted as his Jewish background allowed. This was a means of not offending the Jews so as not to be an obstacle to their receptiveness of the gospel. He was not

pretending to be something he was not, nor was he compromising the gospel just to reach out. When he was with Gentiles, he could relate to them by not offending them in what he ate, or in his occupation, or by flaunting his Jewishness in front of them. To those striving to be under the Law, he obeyed the Law. To those Gentiles outside the Law, he could relate to them because he was under the law of Christ. Paul could abide with local customs as long as those did not conflict with the gospel. This applied not only to food, but also to rights, privileges, and pleasures. He denied himself so as not to be an obstacle to belief in Christ. Paul tried to relate to people so as not to be an offense to them and not be a hindrance to their coming to know Christ. He did not become a drunk to witness to drunks, or become a thief to witness to thieves, or become foolish to witness to unbelievers. He did not compromise the gospel or Christ by becoming just anything to gain an audience for witnessing.

Paul is acting as a servant so that he may win more people to Christ. But he did not compromise his Christian life or his preaching of the gospel to reach people. That is clear from other passages, such as: “*Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.*” (1 Corinthians 9:14) “*Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.*” (1 Corinthians 4:2)

Instead of a “Purpose Driven Church”, Oak Grove should strive to be a God-Jesus-Spirit Driven Church, and a Bible Driven Church.

Sincerely,

/s/ Mike

### References

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Zondervan Publishing House, hardback, ISBN 0310201063, 1995. “If churches are to be successful in evangelizing our society, which is becoming more pagan by the day, they must learn to think like an unbeliever.” – W. A. Criswell in the book’s forward

John F. MacArthur, jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel*, Crossway Books, hardback, ISBN 0891077294, 1993. Written before Warren’s book, but well after the start of Warren’s Saddleback Valley church and similar ones, MacArthur warns against pragmatism in churches and a de-emphasis of preaching the Word of God. The book’s preface alone contains a serious warning about the direction of church services today.