

"Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary"

A number of years ago I went to a seminar featuring a young pastor named Ed Dobson. I forgot what the seminar was about, but I got the most out of it when he talked about a Saturday night service they had recently started, and a book he wrote about it called *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service*.

Soon after becoming Senior Pastor of the huge Calvary Church of Grand Rapids Michigan (founded by M. R. DeHaan, speaker on the Radio Bible Class), Ed began a series of 6 Saturday night services as an experiment. His target audience was unchurched people between the ages of 20-40. At the time of the seminar, that 6 week run of services had still continued (since 1988), with attendance fluctuating from a low of 350 people to over 1300. (They met in an amphitheater). It leveled off at about 800 people each Saturday night.

A format evolved. The platform was cleared of normal church furnishings. The décor featured stark colors, like black, hot pink, blue. There was no congregational singing. Rather, a Christian rock band. Dress was casual – Ed preached in jeans and a sweatshirt. They used drama – brief dramatic presentations. And real life testimonies – often based on the subject for the evening. People submitted questions, and Ed would try to give honest answers. Instead of a sermon behind a pulpit, Ed sat on a bar stool with a hand held mike and kind of just talked! The topics were mostly chosen from questions submitted by the audience, and then referencing Scriptures related to the questions.

And oh, the questions. "I don't care about God giving me a second chance," one wrote. "I want to know where your God was when I was 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and I was sexually and physically abused. Why should I give God a second chance?" Another question: "I'm gay. Is that OK?" And another: "How can I know for sure that God is a reality and not just a psychological crutch?" Someone else wrote: "Is it wrong to have sex before marriage if you're engaged? If so, why?"

Pastor Dobson wrote how one night the topic was "Forgiving Your Parents". After his talk, while dealing with questions, he read this from a card: "My mother died when I was young. And my dad remarried. He married a bitch. My greatest joy in life will be when she dies and I stand at her grave and sing the Doxology." When he finished reading this, there was a nervous rumble of laughter from some people in the audience. He had hardly begun his response when someone stood up and said, "That was *my* question, and I don't appreciate people laughing at me. I'm going through hell and it's not funny...". Suddenly there was absolute silence. No one (including Dobson) quite knew what to do. He tried to answer as best as he could.

When the program was over a long line of people formed to talk to this man and hug him. The pastor waited until others had finished, then hugged him, thanked him for his honesty, and said he loves him. The next week he received a letter from the man, whose name was David. David told of a painful childhood, religious abuse, and a lifelong struggle with cerebral palsy. He said the traditional church was a joke and he doubted whether life had any meaning or purpose. At the end of the letter the young man said "Saturday Night" (the name of the Saturday night church service) was the *only* church service he ever attended where he felt loved and

accepted, the only service where sermons were honest (the man had graduated from theological seminary!). Ed Dobson wrote that David continues to come Saturday nights – has found new faith in Christ – and later stood before the Saturday Night crowd and told what God was doing in his life!

I'm using this illustration of what one church did to try to reach unchurched people not to say we - or any church – should try to do the exact same thing. But I believe the *principle* here is important: They have been able to reach a segment of the population most churches are not touching – 20-40 year olds not going to church – because they *tried to communicate the gospel in a way these people could understand and identify with!*

This kind of service came to be called a "seeker-sensitive service". Referring to their Saturday night service Dobson wrote this: "A seeker-sensitive service is an attempt to place the gospel in a culturally relevant context. The language of contemporary music, drama that engages, talks that are relevant, and answers that are honest make up the language of secular America."

I first preached this sermon over 25 years ago. At that time the kind of service Ed Dobson held and wrote about was a new thing. Since then, elements of that kind of service have become much more common. Churches like LCBC have adopted this format wholeheartedly: casual dress, loud edgy music, a setting that's less church like and more theater like. And more churches today have adopted as their worship style a more informal service with a band and worship team, and more modern praise songs. Even many churches with a more traditional service with organ, liturgies, hymns out of a hymnal are offering a second style of service like that.

Our American culture is more and more secular. It is *so much more secularized today* than it was even back in 1988 when Dobson first began their Saturday night service!

Trying to reach many people today with the gospel is like trying to reach people in a foreign country! More and more people have not been raised to go to church. When they walk in to a traditional church service, for them, it's like setting foot in a foreign country. Totally unfamiliar territory!

When we send missionaries to a foreign country, they first learn the language, customs, and culture of the area they're going to so they can connect with the people. Only then do they go there to share the gospel. It's stupid to send missionaries to Spain who can speak no Spanish, or have no idea how the customs in Spain are different from ours in the U.S. The same applies to our trying to communicate the gospel to the increasing number of Americans who have no knowledge of the Bible, and whose only understanding of the church comes from what they see on TV or the movies or in news reports.

Trying to communicate Jesus and the content of our faith in a way the hearers can connect is not new! The Apostle Paul did this. He writes to the Corinthians: "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might gain all the more. To the Jews I

became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not outside God's law but am within Christ's law) so that I might gain those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

"I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Does this mean Paul was wishy-washy? That he compromised his values and beliefs just so people would like him? Is this like the professing Christian who's all "Christian like" on Sunday morning, but who swears and tells dirty jokes with the coworkers at work, or the church member who just does what the crowd does – even if it's not very ethical – just to be liked? No – this isn't what Paul is saying. Rather, to win people to Christ, he went out of his way to understand the people he wanted to reach – their language, their viewpoints, their values. "To the Jew I became as a Jew" – when with Jews he ate Jewish food, followed Jewish customs. "To those outside the law I became as one outside the law" – when trying to win Gentiles he would eat non-Kosher food and disregard Jewish ceremonial laws. He was willing to bend on these issues in order to connect with lost people.

See, Paul could distinguish between the things that should not be changed from the things that were okay to change. Pastor Ed Dobson in his book has a helpful way of looking at truth. He says there are *absolutes* that cannot be altered if we're to remain followers of Jesus: the deity of Christ, salvation by grace through faith, the resurrection of the body and eternal life (and Scripture tells us what these non-negotiables are). But then, Dobson maintains, there are *convictions*. Christians and churches have strong convictions about issues, and sometimes differ on these: things like whether infants should be baptized, whether a believer should go to war, what particular view one has about Jesus' return. Sincere Christians differ on these biblical and theological matters, but this doesn't affect our eternal destiny. In addition, Dobson says there are *preferences*. Followers of Jesus have different preferences in regards to things like dress codes, hair length for men and women, worship style and choice of music for a worship service. These are just personal preferences. And when we insist that our *convictions* or our *preferences* are the only right way, we limit our ability to reach the lost for Christ!

Paul said, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:2).

Did you notice the title of my message today? *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*. This is actually the title of a book – a book that tries to give insight into unchurched people today: how they think, how they view life. Our chances of reaching people with the gospel are far better if we can get "inside them", to understand where they're coming from.

We're not the first generation in the church to have to deal with this. I've already said the Apostle Paul did. *Jesus Himself* had a wonderful way of meeting people at their level –

communicating eternal Truth in ways that common, non-religious people could understand.

God the Father actually did this too! After trying to communicate His message through people like prophets and kings and other leaders, God finally decided to get down to our level – He became *one of us!* In the person of Jesus of Nazareth!

Paul said, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Just a few quick closing thoughts/questions:

Are you and I willing to change in order to win people to Christ? Can we focus less on *us* and doing what *we* like in the church, and more on people *who don't know the Lord*, and how we might connect with *them*? While holding onto the *absolutes*, the *essential truths* that mark us as followers of Jesus – can we not cling so much to our personal *convictions* and *preferences* that might get in the way of our reaching someone who is lost.

And the other thought, question is: ***How much of a burden do you and I have for lost people?*** The Apostle Paul had a deep and penetrating burden for those who were lost. For instance, for his fellow Jews. He once said, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel...my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Romans 9:2-4a, 10:1).

Jesus once said, "The Son of man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). One of the top reasons Jesus came into the world was to seek out and to save lost people. That was His mission.

That's our mission, too.

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