

“3 Things Seeker Church Got Right”

After watching their elementary age son slide down a tube into kid’s ministry space, Kelly and Will made their way into an auditorium with stadium seating. A motorcycle was stage left and the host was sharing their “Top 10 Reasons Church Still Matters.” Her Letterman-like humor was quirky yet disarming for this unchurched couple.

They described the pastor’s sermon to Kelly’s born-again mom and stepdad over the phone that afternoon as “unexpectedly relevant for their current circumstances.” “Be careful,” his in-laws cautioned in response. “It sounds like a seeker church. Christianity-light,” was their parting shot. Will and Kelly hung up the phone confused. They felt guilty for having liked their experience, pleased that their son TJ wanted to go back, and proud that they had been willing to give a faith community a chance. As a skeptic, Will hoped for a message that communicated at a level he could understand, and Kelly didn’t want to be as bored as she had been when forced to attend with her grandmother in a denominational church across town. But her parents caution gave them pause.

Before tossing the proverbial “baby out with the bathwater” next generation ministry leaders would do well to “chew the meat, spit out the bones” when it comes to lessons learned from seeker-friendly, seeker-sensitive, or seeker-targeted churches. A description I read recently of the seeker movement is typical of its critics when the author wrote, “They revamped the music, spiced up the sermons, and created spectacular programming for kids.” The critique continues, “It worked: Seekers came. Churches grew. But there was a cost. Attracting large crowds meant minimizing offense... so sermons focused on individualistic, therapeutic concerns...”

The intent of this article is not to expose the “straw man” weaknesses of these too common stereotypes of the seeker movement. Nor is it my hope that these contextualized/church growth strategies continue or be reignited by nextgen church, parachurch, and campus leaders. Yet there are lessons to learn from those committed to moving beyond the traditions that held churches hostage in the 1980’s and 90’s. Those who know the movement best know its missiological underpinnings. They know that it wasn’t only about better parenting, battling anxiety, light shows, and pop culture references. It was about how western culture had changed and communication needed a less-assumptive approach to gain a hearing for the population it deeply cared for. Here, I propose that before we abandon the strategies typically associated with the seeker movement there are three (timeless) principles seeker churches got right that next generation preachers do well to consider before discarding.

Natural Law

Article 2 of the Belgic Confession notes the two means (or ways) by which we know God; first, by the “most elegant book of nature” (i.e. God’s creation and providence), and secondly, the book of Scripture. The first we know as general revelation and the second way to know God we call special revelation. Nextgen homileticians committed to expository preaching leave behind an arsenal of “common ground” tools to persuade if they fail to exegete/exposit knowledge the

universe makes readily available (Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:18-20). Everyone is forced to communicate contextually; one can't be understood without doing so. The question is whether it is done well or with intentionality. Preaching to seekers was intentional about finding cultural references (natural law) as starting places to lower seeker's barriers and engage them for a hearing.

Here's an example... in 1998 Matchbox 20 released the song, "Back 2 Good" lamenting the consequence of an unrestrained sexual ethic. In sum, if everyone in our band of friends has hooked up with everyone else then nobody can trust anybody. Our sense of community has been lost and we don't know how to get back to good. Note the lyrics below...

*Well everyone here, is wondering what it's like to be with somebody else
And everyone here's to blame, and everyone here
Gets caught up in the pleasure of the pain
Everyone, well everyone here hides
Shades of shame, yeah but looking inside we're the same
We're the same and we're all grown now
Yeah, but we don't know how
To get it back to good¹*

When artist Rob Thomas is an authority source for the sermon hearer, then persuaders wisely incorporate his cultural insight to bridge Scripture's assertion that a commitment to monogamy is a better option for human flourishing.

Tim Keller distanced himself from "answer the questions the culture is asking" preaching methodology the seeker church promoted;² however, the two shared common ground when it came to natural law as a legitimate source of authority to persuade skeptical sermon hearers. He calls them "apologetic sidebars."³ Keller affirms adapting to the culture to confront the culture and the best of preaching to seekers did too. His posture was more intellectual/academic culture, and his ministry's musical tastes jazz, while the seeker church interfaced with pop culture and top 40. But the baseline is the same; an appreciation of natural law as a valid source of God's revelation and using it to create redemptive analogies for Christian formation.

John the Apostle declared that Jesus is "the true light that gives light to every man" (John 1:9) and Solomon wrote that God has "set eternity in the hearts of men." He added the cautionary statement that man of himself "cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end (Eccl. 3:11). God has given humans a God-given ability to grasp the concept of eternity, with all its unsettling questions for moral agents. Scripture is the special revelation that brings resolution to those questions.

Missiologists know the value of redemptive analogies.⁴ Props, songs, films, and cultural events are tools for communicators to move sermon hearers from the known to the unknown. In educational circles this is known as apperception. Apperception is the mental process by which an individual makes sense of an idea by assimilating it to the body of information she or he already possesses. This is the kind of fodder from contemporary culture's 'natural law' that preachers in the seeker movement took advantage of and is an explanation of why "seekers came, and churches grew."

Learning Preferences

Educational theory informs us that everyone develops ways in which they prefer to learn. Whether the cause of these learning styles is the result of genetics, positive and negative learning experiences, or other unknown factors is not completely clear. But what is clear is the fact that people learn best when exposed to a variety of teaching methods. Experts agree the best method is the one that varies its instruction to feature as many learning modes as possible. Adult learners should be challenged to use all their available capacities and not just those they prefer to use for maximum learning results.

Ricki Linksman in her book “How to Learn Anything Quickly” summarizes the learning styles using the following descriptions, “**The visual learner** learns by seeing. **The auditory learner** learns by listening, hearing themselves talk and discussing their thoughts with others. **Tactile learners** learn by touching or feeling sensation on their skin, by using their hands and fingers, and connecting what they learn to their sense of touch or their emotions. Some learners have an acute sense of taste and smell and learn best when these senses are involved. **Kinesthetic learners** learn by moving their large, or gross muscles in space, and by getting actively involved in the learning process through simulations, role-play, experimentation, exploration, and movement, and participating in real-life activities.”⁵ Drama, TED talks, interviews, team teaching, documentaries, artwork, audience feedback, q&a, and Mentimeter polling are a few of the resources willing communicators can use to great advantage.

Seeker church preachers risked criticism in their attempt to contextualize godly assertions in culturally connected ways. The conclusion for preachers who desire to enhance their sermon's impact for any generation is obvious- use multi-sensory methods that are sensitive to learning styles when preparing and delivering their sermon. Too much is at stake to neglect this duty. Preachers are God's "chosen instrument" and are to "expend every effort, utilize every skill and exhaust every ability."⁶ This assignment necessarily includes creative planning to engage all the God-given senses. While a monologue/lecture format is still effective (note TED talk popularity), a variety of creative tools is to transformation what spice is to the palate.

Farm Thinking

Something keeping us discouraged is our expectation of a harvest. In a world of instant gratification, we preachers implicitly, if not explicitly, think that Christian formation happens faster than is reality. The seeker movement had a different assumption as its starting point. Preaching to spiritual seekers at its core assumed low interest, lower trust, and less knowledge. What if this “farm thinking” appealed to many “believers” as well? I submit that it did. These professing believers appreciated the “making the case” persuasive processes seeker church pastors applied in their sermon development and delivery.

The following quip may be a part of the problem. “The harvest is ripe; the laborers are few. Pray ye...” (Matthew 9:37-38) But what if it's not? What if the way these verses have been used have minimized the totality of what Jesus intended? I assert this phrase has become ridden with ideological baggage and false assumptions. It is quoted with an expectation based on a false

premise and misplaced blame. The false premise is that a harvest without effort is waiting, and the blame is on the lack of volunteers. Not without merit, but more nuance is needed. Better exegesis reveals that the harvest Jesus is expecting (vv. 37-38) is rooted in the work implied in verses 35-36 of that same chapter. Jesus has “prayer walked” their neighborhoods. Jesus has taken notice of the “harassed and helpless.” He has prayed for the “sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus has eaten with them, served them, provided for their felt/physical needs, and released them from misbeliefs rooted in misguided interpretations of the Law (the Sermon on the Mount) by introducing them to freedom and the Spirit of those instructions. Properly understood, the pericope promising a fruitful harvest assumes the neighboring of compassion and service our Lord modeled beginning in Matthew 4. Then he invites (chapter 10) his 12 and then the 72 (Luke 10) to join him in the work of kingdom farming with the expected promise of a harvest.

Preaching with seekers in view thinks more like a farmer thinks. What’s the condition of the soil/soul? What trauma has the soil/soul we’re investing in experienced already? Have their experiences with religious authorities been negative or positive? What has been their exposure to spiritual matters? High exposure or low exposure?

What kind of seed/sharing and how much seed/sharing can this soil/soul bear? Asking these questions and others like them is exegesis for the intent of persuasion, to make God’s invitations understandable and applicable. Watering, not watering down. How much water? Just enough. A good shepherd knows their sheep and they lead and feed them accordingly. This kind of farm thinking was true of the best of the seeker movement and nextgen leaders will benefit by paying attention to their principles and practices.

Triple Dog Dare

A value of natural law, an enthusiasm for redemptive analogies, and thinking like a farmer have benefit for every culture in any generation. Perhaps the bifurcation of biblical and topical is misguided? Preachers that embrace these principles may have to navigate the embarrassment of being called “propman” or “a topical preacher,” or “Christianity-light” but the discipleship produced is worth it. “Do you want to be helpful, or do you want to sound smart” is a motivational question all expositors need to ask themselves? If you’re committed to being helpful, then becoming a student of natural law found in culture in addition to the divine demands found in Scripture is a must. Searching for redemptive analogies and gathering a team to help employ creative elements that meet adult learning needs will mean starting your sermon prep earlier to give time for members to implement. And lastly, a posture of taking time to plow and sow (thinking like a farmer) may annoy the “we’ve never done it that way” congregants when you communicate less-assumptively. But if biblical illiteracy and a post-post-Christian worldview is our reality it may behoove us to further investigate the best of the seeker church movement.

I’m from Missouri-ah. I’m Missouri-ah born, Missouri-ah bred, and I’ll be Missouri-ah when I’m dead. The neighborhood I grew up in in Missouri-ah was “Bluff City” and in that part of the world, a “triple dog dare” was a big deal. You were remiss to snub it. So, I’m calling out nextgen

practitioners, “I triple dog dare you to thoughtfully reconsider what you may have too quickly dismissed... the theological/missiologiical trellis supporting outdated seeker church strategies.

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¹ Rob Thomas and Matt Serletic, *Back 2 Good*. Atlantic: September 1998.

² Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. Penguin Books: 2015. p 97.

³ Keller, *Preaching*, p 112.

⁴ Don Richardson, *Redemptive Analogy*, article. *Perspectives: A Reader*, 4th ed. 430-436.

⁵ Ricki Linksman, *How to Learn Anything Quickly*. Carol Publishing Group, 1996. 21-22.

⁶ Donald R. Sunukjian, "Preacher as Persuader," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*. Moody Press, 1982, p298.