

Gimme That Showtime Religion

Matthew 5:16; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Hebrews 10:24-25

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Can the church fight apathy and materialism by feeding people's appetite for entertainment? Evidently many in the church believe the answer is yes, as church after church jumps on the show-business bandwagon. It is a troubling trend that is luring many otherwise orthodox churches away from biblical priorities.

Church buildings are being constructed like theatres. Instead of a pulpit, the focus is a stage. Some feature massive platforms that revolve or raise and lower, with colored lights and huge sound boards. Shepherds are giving way to media specialists, programming consultants, stage directors, special effects experts, and choreographers.

The idea is to give the audience what they want. Tailor the church service to whatever will draw a crowd. As a result, pastors are more like politicians than shepherds, looking to appeal to the public rather than leading and building the flock God gave them. The congregation is served a slick, professional show, where drama, pop music, and maybe a soft-sell sermon constitute the worship service. But the emphasis isn't on worship, it's on entertainment.

Underlying this trend is the notion that the church must sell the gospel to unbelievers. Churches thus compete for the consumer on the same level as the latest TV reality show or a major motion picture. More and more churches are relying on marketing strategy to sell the church.

That philosophy is the result of bad theology. It assumes that if you package the gospel right, people will get saved. The whole approach is rooted in Arminian theology. It views conversion as fundamentally dependent on an act of the human will. Its goal is an instantaneous, superficial decision rather than a radical change of the heart.

Moreover, this whole Madison-Avenue corruption of Christianity presumes that church services are primarily for recruiting unbelievers. Many have abandoned worship as such. Others have relegated conventional preaching to some small-group setting on a weeknight. But that misses the point of Hebrews 10:24-25: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together."

Acts 2:42 shows us the pattern the early church followed when they met: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Note that the early church's priorities clearly were to worship God and to edify the brethren. The church came together for worship and edification; it scattered to evangelize the world.

Our Lord commissioned His disciples for evangelism in this way: "Go therefore and make disciples of

all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). Christ makes it clear that the church is not to wait for or invite the world to come to its meetings, but to GO to the world. That is a responsibility for every believer. I fear that an approach emphasizing a palatable gospel presentation within the walls of the church excuses the individual believer from his personal obligation to be a light in the world (Matthew 5:16).

We have a society filled with people who want what they want when they want it. They are into their own lifestyle, recreation, and entertainment. When churches appeal to those selfish desires, they only fuel that fire and hinder true godliness. Some of these churches are growing exponentially while others that don't entertain are struggling. Many church leaders want numerical growth in their churches, so they are buying into the entertainment-first philosophy.

Consider what this philosophy does to the gospel message itself. Some will maintain that if biblical principles are presented, the medium doesn't matter. That is nonsense. Why not have a real carnival? A tattooed knife thrower who juggles chain saws could do his thing while a barker shouts Bible verses. That would draw a crowd. It's a bizarre scenario, but one that illustrates how the medium can cheapen and corrupt the message.

And sadly, it's not terribly different from what is actually being done in some churches. Punk-rockers, ventriloquists' dummies, clowns, magicians, and show-business celebrities have taken the place of the preacher—and they are depreciating the gospel. I do believe we can be innovative and creative in how we present the gospel, but we have to be careful to harmonize our methods with the profound spiritual truth we are trying to convey. It is too easy to trivialize the sacred message.

Don't be quick to embrace the trends of the high-tech superchurches. And don't sneer at conventional worship and preaching. We don't need clever approaches to get people saved (1 Cor.inthians 1:21). We simply need to get back to preaching the truth and planting the seed. If we're faithful in that, the soil God has prepared will bear fruit.

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