Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

What's Wrong with "User Friendly"?
Scripture: Acts 2:42, Luke 9:26
Code: A334

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Recently, the 11th edition of the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* was published. The reprint included 10,000 new words-words that will bring us all up to date. Words like "phat" (excellent), "dead presidents" (paper currency), and "McJob" (low paying, dead-end job) are among the entries that will finally help us communicate with our teenagers.

How did those words make it into the updated dictionary? There is one criterion: usage. A word qualifies for the new edition based on how widespread its usage has become. While I can't imagine how phat, McJob, and dead presidents will find a place in America's pulpits (e.g., "The love of *dead presidents* is the root of all kinds of evil"?), there is one phrase borrowed from the computer industry that has spread into mainstream usage in the church-it's impact has been monumental.

"User-friendly" was first used to describe software and hardware that is easy for the novice to operate. Applied to the church, it describes churches that offer a decidedly benign and non-challenging ministry model. In practice, it has become an excuse for importing worldly amusements into the church in an attempt to attract non-Christian "seekers" or the "unchurched" by appealing to their fleshly interests. The obvious fallout of this preoccupation with the unbelievers is a corresponding neglect of true believers and their spiritual needs.

If you want to know how user-friendly a church has become, the emphasis, or de-emphasis, on biblical preaching is the yardstick. A church that buys into the new paradigm sidelines provocative and convicting sermons for music, skits, or videos-less confrontational mediums for conveying the message. Even when there is a sermon, it is frequently psychological and motivational rather than biblical. Above all, entertainment value and user-friendliness are paramount.

I once read through a stack of newspaper and magazine articles that highlight a common thread in the user-friendly phenomenon. These observations from newspaper clippings describe the preaching in user-friendly churches:

"There is no fire and brimstone here...Just practical, witty messages."

"Services at [the church featured in the article] have an informal feeling. You won't hear people threatened with hell or referred to as sinners. The goal is to make them feel welcome, not drive them

away."

"As with all clergymen [this pastor's] answer is God-but he slips Him in at the end, and even then doesn't get heavy. No ranting, no raving. No fire, no brimstone. He doesn't even use the H-word. Call it Light Gospel. It has the same salvation as the Old Time Religion, but with a third less guilt."

"The sermons are relevant, upbeat, and best of all, short. You won't hear a lot of preaching about sin and damnation, and hell fire. Preaching here doesn't sound like *preaching*. It is sophisticated, urbane, and friendly talk. It breaks all the stereotypes."

"[The pastor] is preaching a very upbeat message...It's a salvationist message, but the idea is not so much being saved from the fires of hell. Rather, it's being saved from meaninglessness and aimlessness in this life. It's more of a soft-sell."

So the new rules may be summed like this: Be clever, informal, positive, brief, friendly, and never, *never* use the H-word.

The pastors and leaders in the church-growth movement certainly wouldn't portray their own ministries in that way. In fact, they would probably laud their success in drawing people into the church without compromising the message. But they fail to understand that by decentralizing the Scripture and avoiding hard truths, they are compromising. "For whoever is ashamed of Me *and My words*, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26, emphasis added). If the design is to make the seeker comfortable, isn't that rather incompatible with the Bible's own emphasis on sin, judgment, hell, and several other important topics?

The gospel message *is* a confrontational message. When you remove the confrontation-or soften, downplay, or bring it in through the back door-you have compromised the message. The modern pulpit is weak, not for a lack of witty messages, but because men fear to speak the hard truths of God's Word powerfully and with conviction.

The church is certainly not suffering from an overabundance of forthright preachers; rather, it seems glutted with men pleasers (cf. Gal. 1:10). But, as it was in the early church, when men are faithful to preach God's Word with boldness, God will give the increase. "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching...then fear came upon every soul...and the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42, 43, 47).

When a sinner wanders into the church and sits through skits, mimes, interpretive dances, and the like, and yet never hears a clear, convicting message about his dangerous and tenuous spiritual situation-that he is a depraved sinner headed for an eternal fire because he is a daily offense to a

holy God-how can that be called successful? You could achieve the same level of success by sending a cancer patient to receive treatment from a group of children playing doctor. A sinner must understand the imminent danger he is in if he is ever to look to the Savior.

C. H. Spurgeon, facing a similar mindset in his day, once said:

I fear there are some who preach with the view of *amusing* men, and as long as people can be gathered in crowds, and their ears can be tickled, and they can retire pleased with what they have heard, the orator is content, and folds his hands, and goes back self-satisfied. But Paul did not lay himself out to please the public and collect the crowd. If he did not save them he felt that it was of no avail to interest them. Unless the truth had pierced their hearts, affected their lives, and made new men of them, Paul would have gone home crying, "Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?"...

Now observe, brethren, if I, or you, or any of us, or all of us, shall have spent our lives merely in amusing men, or educating men, or moralizing men, when we shall come to give our account at the last great day we shall be in a very sorry condition, and we shall have but a very sorry record to render; for of what avail will it be to a man to be educated when he comes to be damned? Of what service will it be to him to have been amused when the trumpet sounds, and heaven and earth are shaking, and the pit opens wide her jaws of fire and swallows up the soul unsaved? Of what avail even to have moralized a man if still he is on the left hand of the judge, and if still, "Depart, ye cursed," shall be his portion?" ["Soul Saving Our One Business," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 25 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1879), 674-76.]

That is precisely my concern about today's pragmatic church-growth trend. The strategy focuses on attracting and keeping the unchurched. For what? To entertain them? To get them to attend church meetings regularly? Merely "churching" the unchurched accomplishes nothing of eternal value. That is where their strategy seems to end.

What's worse is when seeker-focused churches baptize the masses with their watered-down gospel, assuring them that positive decisions, feelings, or affirmations about Christ equal genuine conversion. There are now multitudes who are not authentic Christians identifying with the church. The church is literally invaded with the world's values, the world's interests, and the world's citizens. It isn't an invasion prompted by overt hostility; people are simply responding to a survey that came in the mail. Ironically, Satan isn't sowing the tares; church leaders are.

As you set your strategy for church ministry, you dare not overlook the primary means of church growth: the straightforward, Christ-centered proclamation of the unadulterated Word of God. If you trade the Word for amusements or gimmicks, you will not only find that you have no effective means to reach people with the truth of Christ, but you will find yourself working against the Lord Himself.

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