



Should Worship Be "Seeker-Sensitive"?

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"Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Psalm 96:1-3).

Who is a "Seeker"?

1. God: "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (Jesus, in John 4:23).
2. Jesus: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Jesus, in Luke 19:10).
3. Believers: "Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness" (Jesus, in Matthew 6:33). "I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:33-11:1).
4. Spiritually hungry people¹: "God did this so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him" (Paul, in Acts 17:27). "Anyone who comes to [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

What is "Seeker-Sensitivity"?

Looking at the above will give us very different understandings of what it means to be "seeker-sensitive" (and we must be thoughtful of all of them as we seek to be faithful to Scripture—no pun intended!), but most people and churches have something very specific in mind when considering this term. The only problem is that they don't always have the same specific thing in mind. So let me address a few of the misconceptions, and then offer the understanding that we will be following:

1. It is NOT about focusing *exclusively* on seekers.

Such an exclusive focus is characteristic of so-called "seeker services" (for example, the weekend services at Willow Creek), but this is not the same thing as "seeker-sensitivity." It is more properly referred to as being "seeker-targeted" or "seeker-focused."²

¹ Interestingly, while we tend to use the term "seeker," recent research indicates that such people prefer the terms "inquirer" or "explorer." And they definitely do not like being referred to as "lost" or a "nonbeliever." (George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them* [Ventura: Regal, 2002] 94).

² "Seeker-driven" is sometimes used, but this wrongly suggests that the whim of the seeker controls the theology or philosophy of ministry in such settings.

Further, it is a misconception to think that seekers cannot be reached in gatherings that are primarily (but not exclusively) devoted to worshiping God and edifying believers.³ Rather, in such settings, “Seekers are invited to participate fully in order to examine the fellowship of Christians at close quarters as insiders,”⁴ and this has proved very effective, according to George Barna’s recent research:

In our sample of the congregations most effective at reaching the unchurched, few offer a seeker service. Most, however, provide full-on worship services that have been cleansed of Christian jargon, pipe organs, formal dress and traditional symbols, although the latter seems to be making a comeback, given the predispositions of Busters and Mosaics to seek spiritual moorings from ancient traditions and practices. These are churches that want unchurched people to be in a place of worship while worship is happening.⁵

Robb Redman’s research provides us with additional insight along these lines:

Since 1995, there has been a slowdown of interest in seeker services, for a couple of reasons. First, apologetic seeker services work well with formerly church people who have been turned off by church in some way, but less well with people who have no history or connection with a church. . . . Another reason is a rethinking of the assumption that seekers and believers don’t mix. . . . The emphasis has been shifting more toward active participation in worship.⁶

2. It is NOT about ignoring the needs of growing believers.

This, of course, is related to the above, but it is important to clarify that seeker-sensitivity does not require giving less attention to the needs of believers in your ministry setting. We are commanded by our Lord to “make disciples,” which involves both evangelism and edification. We cannot ignore either aspect of fulfilling the Great Commission if we want our churches to grow.

3. It is NOT about keeping up with the latest cultural fads.

There are certainly passing fads in popular culture that provide us with special opportunities to connect and dialogue with the unchurched in our community (and to equip believers to do the same; think of the *Passion* movie, or the book, *The DaVinci Code*), but seeker-sensitivity is not a matter of adapting or responding to every whim of popular culture. It is really more about maintaining a proper cultural relevancy over the long haul (while at the same time remaining biblically faithful). George Hunter explains:

³ This was the original assumption at Willow Creek, which is now being re-thought: “[We] believe that it is not possible to evangelize, edify, and worship within the confines of one service and minister effectively to those who have needs in each of these areas” (“Seekers’ Service/Believers’ Worship” in Robert Webber [ed.], *The Renewal of Sunday Worship*, CLCW, vol. 3 [Nashville: Star Song, 1993] 124). This was also the original assumption at Saddleback (see Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 245), but they are now promoting the idea that a service can be both worship and seeker-friendly without compromising either (see “The Evangelistic Power of Worship,” *Rick Warren’s MinistryToolBox* 131 [Dec. 3, 2003]).

⁴ Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 192.

⁵ Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In*, 130.

⁶ Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening: Singing a New Song in the Postmodern Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002) 20.

Most of our churches are not culturally irrelevant because they fail to stampede with every fad in the popular culture. They are irrelevant because they have not flexed with the much slower, glacier-paced, changes of the surrounding traditional culture. Once, when the typical local church was planted, the church's worship style, language, aesthetics, and music fit the traditional culture of the people they were called to reach, and the church grew for years. Gradually, the traditional culture changed and the church did not, and growth was arrested. The church becomes culturally relevant by adapting to the dominant trends of the traditional culture.⁷

4. It is NOT about abandoning traditional elements of worship.

Of course, some things in our traditions have probably outlived their usefulness and deserve being discarded (when is the last time you "cleaned house"?). Other things deserve being retained, without any change (esp. when they are clearly biblical). Still others deserve being retained, but in a repackaged form (for example, older hymns are of particular interest to those in the emerging generations, but they are accompanied by contemporary instrumentation and sometimes involve new melodies).

But it must be remembered that there is not one style of worship or ministry that is "seeker-sensitive." True seeker-sensitivity will be applied differently in different cultural (or sub-cultural) contexts, as well as over time. It is far more a matter of lifestyle or mindset of the people than a particular style of worship.⁸

5. It is NOT about compromising the truth of God's Word.

First of all, we cannot do so as followers of Christ. But second, seekers are not looking for us to do so! Note what Thom Rainer discovered in his research: "One important lesson that we learned from the formerly unchurched is that we should never dilute biblical teachings for the sake of the unchurched." As one person in his study put it "What really frustrated me was that I had a deep desire to understand the Bible, to hear in-depth preaching and teaching, but most of the preaching was so watered down that it was insulting to my intelligence."⁹

As James Emery White aptly puts it: "Seeker sensitivity has nothing to do with changing the church's message, just the church's manners"¹⁰ Rick Warren further clarifies: "A worship service does not have to be shallow to be seeker sensitive. The message doesn't have to be

⁷ George Hunter, "The Rationale for a Culturally Relevant Worship Service" in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 7 (1996) 137. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. and Sue A. Rozeboom add, in a very stimulating chapter, "It's only natural for the church to be culturally astute and then to practice its worship accordingly. Simply put, this keeps worshipers from stumbling over unnecessary obstacles, and helps them engage God more directly" (*Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking About Christian Worship Today* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003] 65).

⁸ However, some writers still use the term "seeker-sensitive" to refer primarily to a particular style of ministry (usually the Willow Creek model), and speak of our current cultural climate as "post-seeker-sensitive," which confuses things a bit (see, for example, Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003] 25-26; or Jim L. Wilson, *Future Church: Ministry in a Post-Seeker Age* [Littleton: Serendipity House, 2002], noting the subtitle).

⁹ Thom S. Rainer, "Shattering Myths about the Unchurched," adapted from *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Zondervan, 2001). It should be added that virtually all of the research with emerging generations notes an increased hunger for depth and substance.

¹⁰ James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 86.

compromised, just understandable.”¹¹ And this brings us to the positive understanding of seeker-sensitivity:

6. Seeker-sensitivity is, quite simply, *being sensitive to the presence of seekers in Christian gatherings, with the intention of helping them to become fellow-worshippers.*

This is the thrust of the primary biblical passage that addresses the concept (to which we’ll turn in just a moment), and it has to do with at least the following two principles (which are related):

- a. Hospitality

“When you have guests over to your home for dinner does your family act differently than when it’s just your family at the table? Of course you do! You pay attention to your guest’s needs, making sure they are served first. The food may be the same, but you may use a different set of china or present the meal in a more thoughtful way. The table conversation is usually more courteous. Is this being hypocritical? No. By doing these things, you are being sensitive and showing respect to your guests. In the same way, the spiritual food is unchanged in a seeker-sensitive service, but the presentation is more thoughtful and considerate of the guests present.”¹²

- b. Intelligibility

“It would certainly be unscriptural to say that since worship is directed toward God, it doesn’t matter whether the worshipers understand it or not. We do not glorify Go if we fail to communicate on the human level.”¹³ Further, “Only speech that can be understood by others has the potential for building up or edifying the congregation [including the seekers present].”¹⁴

This principle also applies to the music we utilize in our worship gatherings: “If we are to pursue the biblical goal of intelligible worship (1 Cor. 14), we should seek musical settings that speak the musical languages of our congregation and community. To do this is not to cater to human taste, but to honor God in his desire to edify people in his worship. We should not selfishly insist on using music only from our own favorite tradition. Rather, in the spirit of Christ the servant, we must be willing to sacrifice our own preferences in order to reach others with the truth. The Great Commission turns us outward, rather than inward: it calls us even in worship to reach out to those who are ignorant of Christ and of our musical traditions.”¹⁵

What Does the Bible Say About "Seeker-Sensitivity"?

First Corinthians 14 has more to say about corporate worship than any other passage in the New Testament, and it can be outlined as follows:

¹¹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, 243-44.

¹³ John M. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997) 18.

¹⁴ David Peterson, *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 211.

¹⁵ John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996) 140-141.

Edification requires intelligibility (verses 1-5)
Intelligibility for the sake of believers (6-19)
Intelligibility for the sake of unbelievers (20-25)
Order that promotes edification (26-38)

Read the following passage and commentary, and then discuss the questions below:

²³If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. ²⁶What then, brothers [and sisters]? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. (1 Cor 14:23-26, ESV)

As Paul reveals in this passage, church meetings were open to “outsiders” and “unbelievers,” and, based on their response to prophesying in verses 24-25, both terms are almost certainly referring to non-Christians. If there is a distinction between the two, it is probably that those called “outsiders” here are “people who had not committed themselves to Christianity, but who were interested and had thus ceased to be merely ‘unbelievers.’”¹⁶ We have our own word for them today: seekers.

These people may have been guests of the one hosting the gathering, or perhaps the unbelieving spouses of some of the church members, but regardless of who or what brought them, the meeting was to be meaningful to them as well as to the believers present. Thus, as Paul writes in verse 23, if “all speak in tongues” (which is apparently exactly what was happening in Corinth—everyone speaking words that no one understood), the non-Christians who join the gathering will conclude, “You are out of your minds!” and, in a sense, they would be right!

On the other hand, “if all prophesy” (v. 24, an activity where the language is understandable), a seeker may be convicted and ultimately worship God, falling on his or her face proclaiming, “God is really among you!” (v. 25). This is the potential—and certainly the preferred!—impact of corporate worship on those who are guests in our gatherings. As chapter 14 as a whole emphasizes, the key is intelligible, ordered, Spirit-inspired sharing—whether that be prophesying, preaching, singing, or anything else we do. “Let all things be done for building up” (v. 26).

Questions for discussion:

1. What insights did you pick up in reading the above? What questions remain?
2. How might you explain the concept of “seeker-sensitivity” in light of the above?
3. What specific implications does all of this have for your weekend worship gatherings?

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* TNTC, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 191.

The point of 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 is quite clear: “Paul wants nothing done in worship that will unnecessarily drive unbelievers away.”¹⁷ New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg has summed it up even more specifically, indicating that, yes, our worship should be “seeker-sensitive”:

Without denying the central scandal of the cross (1:18-2:5), worship leaders and participants must reflect on how they can best “package” their ministry and message so as to make Christianity attractive rather than repulsive to interested outsiders. Then they can expect people to come to Christ as a result of their services, though how many and how often depends entirely on the Spirit’s sovereign hand in convicting men and women and regenerating human hearts.¹⁸

How Can You Become More Seeker-Sensitive?

Begin by thinking through the following questions¹⁹ (feel free to add questions of your own):

1. Questions to ask yourself:

- a. Do I have a passionate concern to be and to help others become “the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23)? That is, am I “Seeker-sensitive,” capital “S”?
- b. Do I actively seek to make guests feel welcomed and valued by reaching out to them, or do I usually connect only with people I know? That is, am I “seeker-seeking”?
- c. Do I pray for sensitivity toward seekers, asking God to direct me to guests that I can encourage spiritually and help feel more at home in our gatherings?
- d. As I communicate with seekers, am I thoughtful concerning the language I use so that they will better understand what we are talking about?
- e. As I plan and lead worship (or preach), am I consciously aware of seekers? In what ways?

2. Questions to ask of your worship gatherings:

- a. Would you consider your worship gatherings to be seeker-sensitive? Why or why not?
- b. Do you receive regular feedback from guests (seekers or believers) that your gatherings are warm and friendly? What can you do to make those times even more hospitable?
- c. Do your gatherings regularly (or at least occasionally) draw seekers into a genuine encounter with the living God, as evidenced in their repentance of sin and submission to Jesus? Do you at least pray to that end, asking the Spirit to work powerfully in your gatherings?
- d. Do you provide seekers with meaningful ways to participate in your gatherings so that they can engage with God and move toward a commitment to Christ?
- e. Is the language used throughout the gathering devoid of Christian jargon and in-house theological terms that outsiders would find strange and difficult to understand?
- f. When unfamiliar terms are used (whether in the teaching or the songs), do you provide explanations so that seekers can understand things better? Same goes for unfamiliar practices, such as celebrating the Lord’s Supper.
- g. Do you use a Bible translation that a seeker would be able to understand easily, and do you provide in your teaching any resources to help make the learning process more engaging?

¹⁷ David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 633.

¹⁸ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 274.

¹⁹ Some of which are adapted from Mark D. Roberts, “Should Worship Be Seeker-Sensitive? In Search of Biblical Guidance,” *Worship Leader* (September/October, 2001).

- h. Is the musical style and instrumentation used in your gatherings a reflection of your local setting as well as the gifts resident among your people and guests? Do seekers find the music meaningful? How do you know?
- i. Are you upholding the integrity of the gospel and of Christian worship as you seek to host culturally-relevant gatherings? That is, are you in any way compromising the truth of God's Word in your efforts to be more seeker-sensitive?

Ask similar questions of your pre-service and post-service times, your printed material (programs and such), and even of your facilities (both outside and inside). All of these should also be properly seeker-sensitive!

What Is the Key to Effective Seeker-Sensitivity?

The key is not cutting-edge music or creative graphics or clever messages or even comfortable seating (as much as these may prove helpful). Rather the key is a church full of people who have a seeker-sensitive lifestyle and mindset—people who say, along with Paul, *"I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ"* (1 Cor 10:33-11:1). Barna confirms this fact in his research:

*"Ultimately, the key to the process turns out to be the people in the church. Outsiders visit a church looking for insiders who are sensitive to the needs and background of the unchurched. They seek people who will be flexible enough to adjust to some of those needs and whose demeanor and behavior are stellar examples of authentic Christianity in action."*²⁰

²⁰ Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In*, 106.