

Other "Thinking Drafts" and writing by Keith Drury -- <http://www.indwes.edu/tuesday> .

THEY COME FOR THE SHOW BUT REFUSE TO GROW

American evangelical Sunday evening attendance has collapsed, Sunday school is in total meltdown, even our latest discipleship effort -- homes groups -- are now in a tailspin. But morning worship attendance is still doing quite well, thank you, especially in big churches. In the last ten years these other meetings have languished, but we've given our morning services quite a facelift.

And the people like it. New people are coming in. Things are exciting! We're getting lively music, neat sound equipment, cool spotlights, quality dramas, need-oriented preaching, and magnificent musicals. Morale is up. Attendance is up. Excitement is up!

But is godliness up? Christlikeness? Commitment? Or, do we have bigger and bigger audiences who come to watch the performance, but don't get serious about real Christian commitment. This growing problem caused Jack Hayford to say of this growing class of church people, 'they come for the show, but refuse to grow.'

A minister from one of my own denomination's fast-growing churches remarked tongue-in-cheek, 'Our people are converted in every way except their mind-set, life-style, and values.' Exactly. Even after we have gotten people 'converted,' many still act and think about the same as they did before they were converted. What got converted? Just because they come for the show, does not mean they are willing to grow... or be faithful to their spouse... or tithe.

It's probably the fastest-growing class of Christians in the last decade or so. The 'unconverted converted,' or the 'secular Christian.' These folk claim to be saved, but don't let religion cramp their style. They are consumers, breezing through churches as they would a salad bar, picking and choosing what appeals to them, leaving the rest alone. They generally select the positive, helpful, pleasant benefits of the gospel and leave behind any painful, sacrificial, cross-carrying, judgment aspects. They are a shallow bunch but they are a happy lot. They appear to have the best of both worlds. At least in this life.

But there's a danger here. I'm certainly not against the great worship reach-out of the last ten years (even though I keep nagging evangelicals by reminding us if they are really winning to Christ as many as we say, then eventually our collective attendance should rise, which it hasn't). On the contrary, I'm delighted that thousands of people like our entry-level, seeker-sensitive services. After all, I am often quoted as saying, 'It's a sin to make the gospel boring.' (Actually it was John Maxwell who popularized this saying, but I probably agree with him.)

So what's the problem? The problem is spiritual shallowness. We are gradually getting a spiritual river 'a mile wide and an inch deep.' This new caste of Christian is spiritually untransformed. They like church. (At least one hour a week of it). A few might even like the warmth and support of a home support group. They'll even sign up for classes on CPR or 'How to potty train your child.' But when it comes to committed discipleship, they pass.

Not all Christians, mind you, and not all churches (I'm sure you will write to tell me yours is the

exception). But generally speaking the American church has a spiritual shallowness problem. And this class of Christians is growing faster than all others combined. Some argue these folk aren't converted at all. They say that people with largely unchanged lives -- persons with unconverted 'values, mind-set, and lifestyles' -- are truly unconverted altogether. Maybe they're right. Perhaps we have democratized salvation, lowering the threshold to enable just about anyone to call him or herself a Christian with no cost, no change, and no repentance. But our efforts to 'Disciple' this class of shallow Christians have largely failed. Oh, they'll give six weeks to a support group, to talk about their own personality, money management, or how to succeed in their job. But by and large, the 'Secular Christian' checks out of tough discipleship. Could it be that our efforts fail because these folk are not yet converted? Can you disciple unconverted people? Instruct them, sure. But 'disciple' them? I wonder.

Of course, this kind of Christian is not that new, really. Evangelicals have always accused the so-called 'mainline' churches of having lots of them. We bragged that we didn't have too many. Now we're catching up. Perhaps winning, -- in the race to have the most shallow Christians, that is. They have them on mission fields to. There they are called 'Rice Christians' -- so long you give them free rice, they'll be back. 'Find a need and fill it.' In the Middle Ages, of course, there were hoards of them. Paul dealt with many of them in Corinth. And, of course, Jesus had thousands of His own following his bread & fish seeker-service on the hillside. He lost most when He turned to preaching the Cross and sacrifice. Rice Christians aren't new. It's just that evangelicals are having a bumper crop lately. Not that attending something beyond morning worship makes you more spiritual, but, given the general idea of church, it should have some effect shouldn't it?

The good news is this. When the church finally gets alarmed at spiritual shallowness where will it turn? True, there's not that much concern yet. We're still quite thrilled with ourselves... and our popularity with the throngs of rice Christians. But the church of Jesus Christ is self-correcting. Or, rather, Holy Spirit correcting. The church will eventually get concerned at this huge group of entry-level Christians, or sub-Christians.

And when we do, where will we turn? Will we hustle to increase the quality of our dramas and musicals? Will we try to raise the height of our living Christmas trees, or purchase more expensive spotlights and higher quality sound boards? Will we launch a dozen more warm support groups or potty training classes? Will these things solve the spiritual shallowness problems we face?

I don't think so. I don't think there's anything wrong with these methods to get people in the door. These are excellent 'first-step methods.' But, the more they succeed, the more first step Christians we'll have. So, where will we turn to make deeper Christians out of the first-steppers?

We will turn where we've always turned. We will turn to teaching the Word of God, what else? How else to get the half-converted Christians more fully converted? All kinds of things will get people in the door. But teaching the Word is the only way to get a person's 'mind-set, values, and life-style' converted.

This means that Bible study classes might see a resurgence again in the future. I bet in the next decade, we'll see a great 'back to the Bible' movement. There is early evidence of this already. Watch the ads in Christianity today. Check the most recent books. It's coming. Some pastors will launch top-level schooling classes with tough standards of homework, tests, and even grades. The Sunday school will get back to the Bible as it's authority, and the 'let's share opinions and pool our ignorance' classes will gradually disappear. Pastors will get tired of limiting their primary ministry to entry-level seekers and will ratchet up the heat on their sermons. We could face a total resurgence of Bible teaching in the next ten years -- from the pulpit and in the classroom. Why, of course. How else will we lead entry-

level Christians to spiritual growth and commitment?

At least that's what I think.

So what do you think?

To contribute to the thinking on this issue e-mail your response to Tuesday@indwes.edu

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