

Q&A – Seeker Sensitive

"Are you seeker sensitive?"

If by seeker sensitive you mean "*do you have watered down worship*", then the answer is "No". And if you mean, "*Do we preach gimmicky messages that are devoid of God's Word?*" Then, once again, my answer is No.

You see, at Substance, we believe that worship and preaching can be deep, rich and full of God's Word, yet simultaneously applicable to new believers. I've never felt the need to compromise the truths of God's Word in order to reach more people. I regularly teach the inconvenient truths of scripture. (In fact, get ready for some in this essay). And amidst the trend to preach style over substance, we obviously aim for the latter :)

That being said, I want you to consider another problem in the United States. Imagine if you saw a young couple holding a pair of cute newborn babies in their hands. It's amazing how small and delicate God's little creations can be. Now imagine that same couple taking two-inch cubes of steak and shoving it down their throats with determination. If you had any head on your shoulders, you'd immediately see that this is child-abuse. After all, the likelihood of those little babies' surviving is slim and none. Unfortunately, this is what many churches do to God's little ones all across the United States. (And then we wonder why our churches never grow!)

Unfortunately, churches across the U.S. are filled with boring expository messages or bizarre worship experiences under the pretense of "depth". Don't get me wrong: The body of Christ needs the expository preaching of God's word so that they can have a deep understanding of the Bible. And I'm certainly not going to throw out all charismatic experiences simply because a few churches have a unique obsession with shofar horns and tambourines.

However, I simply believe that if we want to be a healthy growing church, we need to learn how to make sure that every member of the family gets a meal that truly nourishes their souls; which means: steak for some, milk for others.

For example, a friend of mine happened to visit a Rolls Royce dealer in the UK just for fun. (And if you didn't know, these are extremely fancy luxury vehicles). The showroom floor was absolutely spectacular. The whole area made you feel like you were the most important person in the world.

As my friend sat down inside this brilliant machine the aroma of supple leather wafted up. The dashboard shimmered with classy glory. And the door closed with such firm precision that it seemed like heaven itself had enveloped him. So, putting both hands on the steering wheel my normally frugal friend starting thinking: "This car would certainly change my life!"

Of course, he could never justify spending the money on such a possession; even more, material possessions never seem to satisfy; yet, the whole experience lingered pleasantly on his mind for the rest of his trip.

So, how does all of this pertain to "seeker-sensitivity?" Well, in all my days of buying cars, I never remember seeing a car's oil being changed on a showroom floor. And why is that? It's because the showroom has only one purpose: To help a

potential customer realize that: although it costs you a lot, you will have a far better life if you have that vehicle. (& if you've ever read the parable of the hidden treasure in Matthew 13:44, you'll see some parallels here).

Does this mean that a dealership "doesn't believe in oil changes?" Not at all. In fact, that same dealership also has a parts department as well as a mechanic's shop. Each area has a different function relating to every aspect of a car's complete care.

Of course, the reason I gave you this analogy is because, this is essentially how Substance operates. Much like cars, the maintenance of our souls require numerous different "departments" or experiences. We need to "buy the car" (a.k.a., pay the price to buy the treasure (Mt. 13:45). Then we need regular maintenance (through Bible study, prayer, fasting, and worship). And, through the parts dept., we may need to replace the engine all together (repentance, deliverance, and inner healing). Not all of these experiences can be accomplished in a singular Sunday morning experience (unless it's 3 hours or more). And here's why this stratification of experiences is important: The current strategy of American church services is dying. The average Evangelical and / or pentecostal church is not growing very well. And growth is a sign that we're in sync with God (Jn 15).

For example, did you know that only 9.1% of all Americans go to any Bible believing church of any kind with any consistency. In the northern Twin Cities, it even dips below 5%. This means evangelical churches are miserably losing the battle for souls. In fact, there is not a single state in the U.S. where the growth of Evangelical or charismatic churches even kept up with their state's population growth. Clearly, there is something wrong here because Jesus said "*the harvest is plentiful yet the workers are few.*" Frankly, there is no reason why churches shouldn't be busting at the seams – unless there is something wrong.

Pastors from across the United States ask me all the time: "How in the world does Substance reach so many totally unchurched people?" Every week we have people walking into our campuses drunk or stoned. And every month we see a *minimum* of 40 totally unchurched people repent and become plugged-in members of our church community. We never "water down" our gospel or worship experience. At the same time, we never "*change the oil on the showroom floor.*"

So this is what most churches do: (1). Either they change the oil on the showroom floor by doing Christian activities that are more suited for long-term Christians; thus, they either freak visitors out or bore them to death (with sermons answering questions people aren't even asking... or worship experiences for a God that they don't really even know.) Or, (2). Churches create a showroom floor... but never have any other opportunities for a church to get "Deep". Thus, they end up being superficial feel-good gospel presentations with no substance.

To make matters worse, everyone has a different definition of "deep". To some, "deep" means one-hour messages on the book of Leviticus... to others, deep means 3 hour altar ministry experiences. And, for many people, it's not enough that a church offers deeper opportunities. After all, many Christians aren't satisfied until you manifest *their concept* of "deep" smack dab in the middle of the Sunday morning experience. Then, quite often, pastors make matters worse by "spiritualizing" their worship experience as "the best." (i.e., if you were truly spiritual, you would do

church exactly like this). But, I believe that every church needs to figure out the purpose of a Sunday morning service for themselves.

In my opinion, Sunday morning church should not be for "Christians." And why? It's because, studies have shown that, if an unchurched person was to seek out a spiritual experience, the most likely time that they would check out a church would be the service closest to the 10:30 am time slot. Thus, any church who wants to be effective in the great commission will save these golden hours for God's precious lost lambs.

Don't get me wrong. We love to feed steak to our long-term members. I love to dive deep into Bible study and systematic theology. I love 4 hour worship experiences where we wait on God with totally surrendered lives. Yet, I also know that most unchurched people would be totally freaked if that was their first experience of church.

Like Paul taught in 1 Cor. 14, there are certain experiences that are good; yet, "if those who are ignorant or who do not understand come into your midst, will they not say, 'you are out of your mind!'" And that's exactly what unchurched people say of churches across the U.S. "You guys are obviously obsessed with boring Bible studies!" "You guys are obviously obsessed with spooky emotionalism." In other words, we're trying to feed meat to people who aren't ready to digest it.

So what should we do? Should we drink milk all the time? No! Should we force steak down the mouths of newborn babies? Absolutely not. Rather, every church must decide for itself: "What are the best ways to serve this diverse family the nourishing meals that it deserves?" To do this, a church may need to design its programs to target audiences of varying levels of maturity.

At Substance, we realize, the best midweek discipleship program in the world is useless if we can't even get an unchurched person to return another week. And to put it more dramatically: We can't expect God to entrust us with his lost baby lambs when we abuse them and then boast about "our superior depth" on Sunday mornings. Quite simply, churches need to become more politically savvy and generate an approach that is sophisticated enough to nurture *all levels of faith... including those without it.*

Rather than having this silly "either / or" debate about the "depth" of a church, we believe this is a "both / and" type of issue. So, to return to the dealership analogy, our goal is simple. On Sunday mornings, we primarily focus on "selling the car." Then all throughout the week we saturate our congregation with the opportunities for deeper church experiences: From Bible studies to extended intercession, God wants to call us deeper.

But one thing is for sure: The body of Christ will never grow to maturity when the people of God get lost in silly either/or arguments bickering about "seeker-sensitivity." The Bible says that God desires "all men to be saved." And any church that seeks to be Biblical will design programs that reach "all men."

Even more, let's stop judging other churches' values exclusively based on what they do on Sunday morning. Everyone has a different path towards Biblical discipleship. And some people use their Sunday services to minister to long-term Christians; and others simply want people to come back long enough to pull them into their discipleship oriented small groups.

So don't be one of those ignorant Christians who go around "judging books by their covers" (i.e., judging churches by their Sunday experiences). The body of Christ has enough judgmental people who tear apart the body of Christ under the guise of protecting it. Besides, you can't row the boat when you're rocking it. Whenever anyone rants about the "dangers of seeker-sensitivity" I encourage them to rebuke others through fruitfulness, not talk.

And when only 9.1% of people even bother to go to an evangelical church, I'll value ANY church that preaches God's word – even if it's not in the way that I prefer most (Php.1:17). And perhaps then, we'll be more like the Apostle Paul who "rejoiced" that Christ was preached – even when it is done differently than we prefer.