

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Ministry/Church

Saints vs. Seekers

A Critical Assessment Of Church Ministry In America (Part 4)
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“**W**e should sign up online,” my wife insisted rather excitedly as she was setting the dinner table. “I think this could *finally* be the one, don’t you?” Although I was a tad more reserved in my thinking, I had every reason to share her optimism. Perhaps she was right; maybe this was the church we had been looking for all along. I played along affectionately and answered, “I hope you’re right. Let’s register for the class.”

Robin and I had received word through the grapevine that a nearby megachurch—a popular congregation which we had looked into recurrently during our six-month search for a new home church—was offering an introductory class for potential members. Unlike several churches we had already visited, the production value showcased at this megachurch, including its ample parking, impressive youth program, uniformed attendants, promotional resources, and, of course, the cheers of goodwill that greeted us on our visits, was very intoxicating. As uncommitted as we were to sign on the dotted line as members (having only visited sporadically for a couple of months), we were, nevertheless, love-struck by the church’s emphasis on excellence.

My enthusiasm, however, was also tempered by a disquieting sense of reservation. The fact that we had attended services on only a handful of occasions hardly qualified as grounds for membership, let alone so hurriedly. Moreover, up to that point, the church had done little to lift the fog of mystery around its theological bent. Too many uncertainties loomed in my mind. We decided, therefore, that it would be in our best interest to attend the class as inquiring minds rather than as prospective members. Rather than join the church arbitrarily, we hoped to use the class as a means by which to have our questions answered so that we could make an informed decision afterward. In the interim, we prayed desperately that this supersized church, grandiose in all its accouterments, would prove to be the home where, at long last, God would have us settle as a family.

The church itself, by all external appearances, was *very* successful. A newly remodeled building, a booming espresso lounge, a talented worship band, laidback pastors, and a stylistic sanctuary left little to the imagination—except, of course, for its understated doctrinal positions. Owing to the church’s chic operations, I confess that our senses were tantalized. However, as one who is naturally suspicious of superficial frills, I feared this megachurch boasted all the earmarks of a seeker-sensitive congregation. My wife and I agreed, for that reason, to move forward guardedly while remaining open-minded.

I learned beforehand from the syllabus posted online that various church leaders

were slated to be on hand to offer a broad overview of the church's ministry philosophy. In addition to the customary 'meet and greets' with a pastor or two, the class would also include a brief excursion through the church's history, followed by a cursory review of the doctrinal statement.

When we walked into the church Sunday-school room on that blustery Saturday morning, Robin and I were immediately taken by the size of the early-bird crowd. The room was filled to capacity with people who, not unlike the both of us, were still stretching and yawning. Greeting us at the door as we entered was the sumptuous aroma of donuts and muffins, together with freshly brewed coffee and hot chocolate, graciously prepared in advance by church staffers. To my caffeine deprived taste buds, the scent filled the air like a sweet perfume. "Now that's what I'm talking about," I whispered into Robin's ear, oblivious to everything but the cup of Jo and high-calorie breakfast calling my name. "Membership class done with excellence!"

We took our seat at the nearest table next to the door. Seated across from us was a middle-aged married couple with pencils at the ready and binders' flung open, as well as a young lady who sat at the opposite end. They each offered polite smiles as we settled in alongside them. We introduced ourselves in return and, before long, the five of us were engaged in a courteous conversation about the pleasantries of the morning.

Behind the podium stood the deacon; a husky man who seemed to be rehearsing his notes quietly to himself. Across the room stood an attractive woman, his wife apparently, who was going about her business mingling with a few latecomers. After allowing us a few minutes to enjoy our morning refreshments, the deaconess took center stage next to her husband and politely called for order. They opened the class with prayer and, before long, we were under way.

Nothing jarring happened during the first hour. It was a typical church membership class where the deacon spoke at great length about the godliness of the pastoral staff while at the same time expressing his personal love for and devotion to the church he had called his home for years. Interspersed between his prepared script and the cordial introductions of various staff members was an impressive montage that depicted the church's history spanning two decades. Although a few trivial questions were posed during the hour, nothing substantive came from them. Everything up to that point was fairly mundane. But the humdrum morning quickly changed when we entered the second hour and turned our attention to doctrine.

Reviewing the fundamentals of the faith is part and parcel with any church membership class. And this class was no exception. But what I had assumed would be a perfunctory review of accepted evangelical doctrines soon turned into a verbal scrimmage between the deacon and a few inquisitive minds. Only minutes after our first break, I felt the atmosphere in the room shift. What once was a harmonic classroom soon became a concert of clamor.

At issue was the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It was obvious that some in the class were confused by the triunity of God whereas others bluntly objected to its irrationality. Despite the confusion, the deacon tried to press on with the curriculum respectfully, but to no avail.

"I don't understand it," a woman protested in frustration. "Three in one? One in three? How can God be one God yet three gods?" Another voice could be heard in the background adding to the chorus of confusion: "Jesus is the Son of God, right?—but not

God himself. Or is he? But if so, then what's the Holy Spirit?" Still another person interjected, "Well, I haven't read the Bible yet, but this is something I've never understood either, going all the way back to my Catholic years at CCD. What's a *Trinity*?" Even more shocking, the married man sitting directly across from me at my table threw his two cents into the ring: "I don't believe Jesus is the only way to heaven," he blurted out of context. "I believe God can use prophets or angels, or whatever you call them, from other religions to speak to us." Another woman seconded his opinion: "All religions are rooted in the same truth, I think. It's pretty arrogant for us to think otherwise."

The classroom grew more and more rambunctious. It was evident that the deacon, though an earnest man, had bitten off more than he could chew. He was neither a doctrinal authority nor well-versed in systematic theology apparently. As the barrage of shotgun questions continued, he floundered embarrassingly. I had pity for him, to be sure, but not much. To me, it was unacceptable that a deacon could be so ill-prepared to field commonly-asked questions, and thus rudimentary, or incapable of providing cogent answers to those who were using the class as a platform to challenge historic truths.

In the air was an odor that reeked of wanton unbelief or, at best, simple ignorance. Some of the questions were outright deplorable given that they were submitted by supposedly *lifelong* Christians. Even worse, those who volunteered their theological judgments, to include the married gentleman at my table who denied the exclusivity of Christ in salvation, smacked of heresy. It was peculiar to me that this church membership class seemed overpopulated with skeptical goats rather than believing sheep. The tone of their objections begged my concern as to whether they were actually *in Christ* to begin with, to say nothing about whether or not they qualified to be members *in a church*!

Membership class is *not* designed to be a seminary for unacquainted goats. Church membership, rather, is a way of officially identifying oneself with a local body of believers under a united banner. Although it is nowhere commanded in Scripture, membership to a church is, essentially speaking, a statement that a Christian is in agreement with that local church and is willing to be identified as a representative of it. And if these particular individuals in the classroom hadn't yet come to terms with—or were *unwilling* to come to terms with—the fundamentals of the faith, then they certainly had no right to become members.

The apostle Paul warned the early Church that "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). As Paul saw it, the body of Christ was to be on guard against error lest the Church become contaminated as a result. This truth applies also in terms of church membership. Allowing doctrinal flexibility so that goats can enter the sheep pen is a clear and present danger that threatens the Church's purity. The local church, therefore, is to be discriminating toward those it accepts into its fold.

I grew increasingly restless. Suddenly, I felt a hand under the table gently apply pressure to my knee. It was my wife's soothing touch encouraging me to relax. Knowing me as well as she does, Robin could sense my irritation over the deacon's failure to rein in the goats. She feared, or so I thought at the time, that I might speak out of turn and perhaps add kindling to the already blazing fire. And she was right. I wanted to intercede on behalf of the deacon and offer some smidgeon of theological assistance that

would help put an end to the ruckus peaceably. My natural inclination was to satisfy the inquisitiveness of the sheep and rebuke the errors put forth by the cynical goats.

Rescue finally came, or at least I had hoped, in the form of the associate pastor. Unbeknownst to many of us, Pastor Larry¹ had been laying low in the back of the room out of sight and out of mind. He was, I am sure, overseeing the proceedings from afar; standing watch, as it were, against the unlikely event that the deacon came under fire. And he certainly had.

I knew Pastor Larry only by name. He was, for all intents and purposes, the glue that held the church together behind the scenes. His name was littered across many of the church advertisements, including the Sunday bulletins, and he seemed to be on equal footing with the executive pastor. From what little I gleaned from him on the few occasions I heard him speak, I suspected that he had a sharp wit about him and a strong handle on Scripture. Although a short, middle-aged man with an unassuming appearance, he came off as intellectually formidable. When he joined the classroom discussion I was certain he'd come to the deacon's rescue and put out the doctrinal fire with a good dousing of Scripture. Sadly, I was wrong. Instead, to my chagrin, he changed course and diverted our attention.

"The doctrine of the Trinity is not something that is easily understandable," Pastor Larry chimed in, commanding the eyes of everyone in the room. "You shouldn't feel inferior if you don't fully understand its teaching. But for the sake of time, we need to move on from the particulars of historic Christianity and the Bible and tell you about *who* we are as a church, *what* we are all about, and *how* our mission as a church serves the community at large. It's our hope that through this class, as you learn more about our fellowship, you will join us in making your faith relevant to your neighbors who are looking for fulfillment in their lives."

And with that bland response from the associate pastor the commotion ended. But not before the young woman seated alone at the end of our table voiced the popular sentiment in the room. "That's what I love about this church, you know, and that's why I'm here today," she said proudly. "I love that *there's not a lot of Bible here!* It's refreshing to come to place where the emphasis is more on who we are as a community of faith. I like that this church focuses more on *us* instead of just preaching from the Bible all the time."

There's not a lot of Bible here? Focuses on us? I was thunderstruck. How a supposedly born-again Christian could make such a naked remark and relish in such a dim view of God's inspired Word was beyond my comprehension. Why any professing believer would gleefully celebrate a church that abandoned the Bible's primacy was inexcusable. Moreover, how a person who claims to be regenerated but prefers a church where the focus is on them rather than the object of our worship as Christians was unfathomable to me.

I wondered to myself how John Bunyan would have responded if he were alive to hear such wretched words spoken at a church meeting. It has been said of Bunyan, the seventeenth century Puritan preacher who penned the classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*, that his devotion to the Word of God was without equal. Charles Spurgeon once commented, "Prick Bunyan anywhere *and he bleeds the Bible*"² (emphasis added). Apparently, this young woman seated at my table did not share John Bunyan's biblical blood type. To my way of thinking, her words revealed her true colors. She was a goat,

concealed behind a mask of wool, trying to creep into the sheep pen.

Her statement continued to echo in my ears. *This church focuses on us instead of just preaching the Bible all the time!* I waited intently for Pastor Larry to come to the defense of Scripture or, at the very least, to rebuff the glowing salute of a goat who enjoyed basking in the focus of the church. But, alas, it was not to be. Pastor Larry had returned to the back of the room to resume his watch over the class in silence. The deacon, meanwhile, left to his own devices, merely nodded consentingly, apparently unwilling to challenge the woman further.

I couldn't contain myself any longer. Pastor Larry's lackadaisical response to the doctrinal chaos, the deacon's failure to preserve the Bible as the bedrock for church ministry, and their abysmal failure to take to task the blatant heresy spewed out loud in the room was nauseating. This was supposed to be a church membership class where not only the church's philosophy of ministry was put on display but also where professing believers—prior to their admittance into the local fold—were first vetted for doctrinal purity, a credible profession of faith, obedience to the sacraments, and their willingness to submit to church authorities. It was evident to Robin and me, however, that the church had little interest in separating the sheep from the goats. Their target audience was all-inclusive.

Perturbed, I decided to break my silence. "I have a question I'd like an answer to." I could feel the collective stare of the room land on me as well as the growing tension in my wife's hand gripping my knee. "There is something I have noticed in my few visits here that is disconcerting to me and I'm hoping you can clear things up a bit."

The deacon stared at me with an emotionless expression, most likely fearing another round of doctrinal infighting. I also drew an apprehensive look from Pastor Larry. After a brief pause to collect my thoughts, I asked point blank: "Where are all the *old* people?"

My question was unexpected. Obviously caught off guard once again, the deacon struggled to find a response. His silence gave me an opportunity to elaborate: "Our family has been visiting for a couple of months now and, to be candid, I've yet to see one silver-haired saint grace the halls of this church. And for a church pushing eight hundred members I find that quite remarkable—actually more disturbing really."

The deacon's vacant expression brokered a smile. "That's right," he said, proudly. "We're a young church in terms of our median age. When we adopted the Purpose-Driven philosophy of ministry a decade ago, based on the book *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren, our congregation underwent a sociological makeover. The median age here is now thirty-three whereas before it was somewhere in the upper fifties."

Robin's hand tightened on my knee. I could hear her thoughts as though she had voiced them out loud. *Oh no! Purpose-Driven!*

I spoke frankly. "Well, you'll have to forgive me for saying so but I can't help but feel concerned about that. I was beginning to wonder if this church caters specifically to the unchurched. And given the absence of seasoned believers here, at least in age, I'm forced to conclude the worst, am I not? I can't help but assume that younger people come here because of the church's contemporary appeal. Yet, as they grow up in their faith—if in fact they do grow—and start developing a hunger for meat rather than milk, they have no other alternative but to follow the trail of the older Christians who have

gone elsewhere to get their fill. Is that the case?”

Before the deacon could answer, I concluded, “The absence of older saints suggests to me that the reason that your median age dropped so significantly is because the church changed its target audience from sheep to goats, and that perhaps you folks are now in the business of entertaining rather than feeding.”

When the deacon failed to respond to my question convincingly, Pastor Larry interrupted and called the class to a break. In hindsight, I suppose it was yet another diversion tactic to avoid my hardnosed line of questioning. Regrettably, I never received an answer.

During the break Robin and I came to terms with the fact that our search for a new church would continue. As noted earlier, she and I had prayed that this supersized church, impressive in all its trimmings, would indeed prove to be the home where God would have us settle as a family. But by its carefree willingness to recruit unbelievers into its membership, including its lack of biblical emphasis and its unbiblical target audience, the church showed itself to be a feeding trough for goats rather than a sheep pen for the Elect. Thus, it was not the church for us.

Robin and I continued our search for a new home church for the next few months, in prayer and supplication, before finally landing on where God wanted us. All the while, we thanked Him for unanswered prayers.

Saints vs. Seekers

After reflecting back on his forty-year reign over Israel, an elderly King Solomon lamented, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). His gloomy journal—namely, the book of Ecclesiastes—tells the story of a prosperous monarch haunted by his spiritual bankruptcy. King Solomon had squandered his spiritual blessings in exchange for carnal indulgences. His pursuit of pleasure, rather than piety, was his lifelong ambition. Alas, as he neared the end of his life, the one-time archetypal messiah and savior to Israel had been reduced to an arthritic cautionary tale. Owing to his life of waywardness, Solomon spent his twilight years stewing over his regrets.

In retrospection, Solomon expressed grief over the idea that the Hebrew empire he had built—a passion project that had consumed his entire adult life—would outlive the memory of its mastermind. Even worse, he would entrust his kingdom to a successor who, after his death, would neither appreciate the king’s work nor deserve his crown. Thus, all of Solomon’s toil and labor, together with his ingenuity, proved hollow. It was sheer vanity. And while his accomplishments were grand in scale, he was well aware that, in terms of their eternal value in God’s eyes, they were of little value. “So I hated life,” he bemoaned, “because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me” (Eccl. 2:17).

At best, Solomon’s resourcefulness advanced the Hebrew nation to unprecedented levels. At worst, under his leadership the nation sunk to new lows in syncretistic paganism. To his regret later in life, Solomon knew that his political, agricultural, architectural, and military successes would incur the judgment of an angry God who would not look kindly on his abysmal failure to govern the nation *spiritually*.

The Lord would hold him accountable for his dereliction of duty.

Moreover, adding to Solomon's melancholy was the fear that, despite his entrepreneurialism, his record as king would amount to nothing more than a footnote in history. "There is no remembrance of men of old," he mourned, "and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow" (Eccl. 1:11). To his way of thinking, all the political clout he had achieved; all the women he had bedded; all the silver and gold he had amassed; all the buildings he had built; all the property he had secured; all the wisdom and status he had gained; and all the political alliances he had formed were destined to follow him to the grave.

Solomon confessed to foolishly trusting in the pursuit of knowledge for his sense of identity. Yet the sciences had failed to produce the esteem he hunted after. He had looked to all his labors and projects to pacify his thirst for purpose but, like everything else, they left him unsettled. His military conquests and the expansion of Israel's borders did little to placate his troubled heart. For nearly half a century he entangled himself in his wealth, his women, and the merriment of wine for contentment. Nevertheless, in spite of his innumerable luxuries, brilliance, and secular achievements, Scripture teaches that Solomon's quest ended in futility and vice.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun (Eccl. 2:11).

At long last, the wise king was forced to conclude that his search for satisfaction apart from God was utterly "meaningless" (Eccl. 1:2). In a mysterious turn of phrase, Solomon soberly offered his observations on life: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again ..." (v. 9).

Solomon's pessimism is not without merit. Indeed, every generation looks for some satisfying yet undiscovered novelty or idea to revolutionize their world. But each innovation, it seems, proves only to be a disappointing variant from the past. Everything, Solomon rightly determined, is cyclical. "Whatever is has already been," he wrote, "and what will be has been before" (Eccl. 3:15).

In short, neither a pampered life of royal nobility nor the splendor of the sun setting at dusk impressed the silver-haired king. Everything had lost its *originality*. "Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time" (Eccl. 1:10).

In light of Solomon's haunting reflection, it should not surprise the student of Scripture to learn that the Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive philosophy of ministry is nothing new to the Christian Church. To borrow from Solomon's journal, "it was here before our time." Its cloak-and-dagger approach to ministry, though often presented as avant-garde, is simply a rehashing of an old controversy from days bygone. It has been said, in fact, that throughout history there are no new heresies within the borders of Christendom; only old ones repackaged for a new generation. And so it is with the Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive movement. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun.

The Downgrade Of Christianity

Twenty-first century ministers who pander to so-called “seekers” at the expense of preaching the true gospel harkens back to the late-nineteenth century in Victorian England. During this time when the West was experiencing unprecedented growth, the nonconformist Church in England (evangelicals) began flirting with the idea of an innocuous gospel that could appeal to the masses. Simultaneously, in more liberal circles, a critical approach was taken by progressive scholars—owing to the advances in science, philosophy, languages, and history—that called into question the traditional interpretations and fundamentals of the faith. Thus, in one hand were the conservatives who watered down the gospel to attract unbelievers and in the other hand were the liberals who undermined traditional scholarship. It was a double-barrel assault which Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon vociferously protested and eventually demonized as “The Downgrade Controversy.”

Tracing the state of evangelicalism from the Puritan age to his own era, Spurgeon and fellow Baptist preacher Robert Shindler published an article in Spurgeon’s magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, which cautioned the Church against repeating her dubious past. They noted that every revival of true evangelical faith had been followed within a generation or two by a drift away from sound doctrine, ultimately leading to wholesale apostasy. He likened this drifting from truth to a downhill slope, and thus referred to it as a *downgrading*.

Along with liberalism, Surgeon took aim at the gross pragmatism that had crept its way into conservative pulpits. In Victorian England at the time, there was a concentrated effort by some preachers to overhaul the gospel so as to capture the fancies of unbelievers. Spurgeon saw this move as a cancerous error that shifted the Church’s main focus from the sheep onto the goats. No longer were believers being cared for, biblically taught, or fed the Word of God inasmuch as unbelievers were being courted and entertained by showmanship. The Victorian Church, as Spurgeon saw it, was flirting with spiritual disaster in their attempt to romance the culture.

The Bible uses distinct metaphors to distinguish between believers and unbelievers. Sheep, for the most part, refer symbolically to God’s people, both individually and corporately (Psa. 95:7). Conversely, those who live in rebellion to the Lord or make faulty confessions of faith are depicted as goats (Matt. 25:31-34, 41). The inherit traits associated with both animals provide fitting similes.

That the Bible portrays unbelievers as goats is not an unmerited fiction. By nature, goats are ill-tempered and withdrawn; unhurried to learn and naturally quarrelsome. Whereas sheep are gentle, quiet, and easily led, goats are assertive, self-sufficient, and headstrong. They are impulsive and unpredictable, devious and contrary. They prefer solitude in high places over grazing in herds on low pastures. Rambunctious and disruptive, goats rear and butt in defiance and wield their horns in order to establish dominance. They are slow to submit to their shepherd and quick to set off on their own. Not surprisingly, the Bible correlates these stubbornly traits with those who, like Saul of Tarsus, “kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14) and feign obedience to God. To Scriptures way of thinking, unbelievers show themselves to be goats—condemned to an eternity in the lake of fire—on account of their unpredictable, haughty, mean-spirited,

rebellious, unruly, and insubordinate behavior to the Chief Shepherd (Matt. 25:31-34, 41 cf. 1 Pet. 5:4).

To the contrary, the characteristics found in sheep are appropriately attributed to believers. When domesticated, sheep are trusting animals who are easily led by their shepherd. They are affectionate, non-aggressive, and submissive in nature. Sheep are not only meek and defenseless animals, but are independently weak and notoriously vulnerable; a fact which reaffirms their need for a shepherd. As herbivores, they do not prey on other animals but are harmless and tranquil. Watchfully kept, obedient to a fault, easily tamed, exceedingly dimwitted, and selectively bred, sheep are precautious and only breed within their own. Because the Bible describes believers as those who exhibit humility, submissiveness, dutifulness, and a need for a shepherd—while also depicting God’s people as a flock who graze on the pastureland of divine truth (Ezek. 34:13-15)—it is fitting that the penmen of Scripture equate the redeemed with meek ewe lambs.

Understanding these biblical metaphors goes straight to the heart of my issue with Pastor Larry. To many pastors like him, demarcating between sheep and goats on Sunday morning is tantamount to being unloving, bigheaded, bigoted, and certainly anti-evangelistic. In terms of outreach, they regard it as impolite, if not embarrassing, to pigeonhole the unsaved in such crass terms. What’s more, adopting a philosophy of church ministry that includes prejudicial typecasting, albeit biblically legitimate, carries with it the risk of coming off as intolerant to the very community they have marketed themselves to.

By shifting their ministerial focus onto unbelievers, or goats, Pastor Larry and his sort align themselves proudly with the Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive movement. They willingly redress their church services and rewrite their sermons in a way that will amuse the goats. To solicit a crowd, they unthinkably cater to those who live in rebellion to God; who willfully butt heads and kick against His commands; who quarrel and balk at absolute truth with their horns; who scrape and gnaw their way up the corporate ladder in order to gain dominance; and who obstinately refuse to be held accountable or to bow to God’s holiness. Remarkably, it is this cantankerous target audience that the Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive movement aims to appease on Sunday. In their desperation to grow their churches, Purpose-Driven leaders like Pastor Larry have become willing participants, if not eager cheerleaders, in the downgrading of contemporary evangelicalism.

Feeding Sheep Or Amusing Goats

Front and center during The Downgrade Controversy in the late nineteenth century was the last of the Puritans, the Reformed Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Although Spurgeon was not actually a Puritan, his biblical and theological convictions made him a trusted son of the movement. At issue for Spurgeon during the controversy was not just the liberalization of Christianity by ivory tower academics, but the alarming shift among the English clergy and laity to entertain unbelievers.

If ever there was a preacher willing to do battle over Scriptural truths and the sanctity of the Church it was Charles Haddon Spurgeon. The best-known preacher in the world during the 1800's, he assumed the pastorate at London's famed New Park Street Church (formerly pastored by the Baptist theologian John Gill) in 1854, at the green age of twenty. The congregation quickly outgrew their building, moved to Exeter Hall, then to Surrey Music Hall—owing all their success to the grace of God who saw fit to bless Spurgeon with incredible preaching ability. In these venues Spurgeon frequently preached to audiences numbering upwards of ten thousand. In 1861 he moved his congregation permanently to the newly constructed Metropolitan Tabernacle which would later go on record as the first evangelical megachurch in the West.

What Spurgeon denounced in his day as the Downgrade heresy in Victorian England is what the Church seemingly applauds today in American evangelicalism—namely, a philosophy of ministry that has, for lack of better words, gone to the goats. To the point, the influx of goat petting, rather than sheep feeding, has taken the American Church by storm. It's regrettable that Spurgeon decried this heresy to his death only for it to be embraced 'across the pond' by many Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive pastors a century later.

One should conclude, therefore, that not much has changed within Christendom in the decades that have followed Spurgeon's death. With the resurgence of goat pandering in the American Church, King Solomon's words prove true yet again: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9).

An unhealthy fixation on wooing unbelievers, as Spurgeon saw it, inevitably leads to a worldly church filled with bloated goats and malnourished sheep. Moreover, he objected to the license taken by many preachers who swapped weighty sermons (about the pursuit of righteousness) for anorexic homilies (bent on amusing the unchurched).

Provoked to anger, Spurgeon published a scathing rally-call to his fellow English churchmen titled *Feeding Sheep or Amusing Goats?* Despite his essay being over a hundred years old, his words are as true today as they were then. Church growth experts, Emergent church adherents, liberal epistemologists, ecumenical apostates, positive-confession aficionados, seeker-friendly pragmatists, prosperity-health/wealth salesmen, and anti-ecclesiastical heretics should be cautioned: one might find themselves challenged, frustrated, unmasked, and perhaps shaken to real spiritual change as a result of Spurgeon's insightful words:

An evil resides in the professed camp of the Lord so gross in its imprudence that the most shortsighted can hardly fail to notice it. During the past few years it has developed at an abnormal rate evil for evil. It has worked like leaven until the whole lump ferments. The devil has seldom done a more clever thing than hinting to the Church that part of their mission is to provide entertainment for the people, with a view to winning them. From speaking out as the Puritans did, the Church has gradually toned down her testimony, then winked at and excused the frivolities of the day. Then she tolerated them in her borders. Now she has adopted them under the plea of reaching the masses.

My first contention is that providing amusement for the people is nowhere spoken of in the Scriptures as a function of the Church. If it is a Christian work why did not Christ speak of it? “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” That is clear enough. So it would have been if He has added, “and provide amusement for those who do not relish the gospel.” No such words, however, are to be found. It did not seem to occur to Him. Then again, “He gave some apostles, some prophets, some pastors and teachers, for the work of the ministry.” Where do entertainers come in? The Holy Spirit is silent concerning them. Were the prophets persecuted because they amused the people or because they refused? The concert has no martyr roll.

Again, providing amusement is in direct antagonism to the teaching and life of Christ and all His apostles. What was the attitude of the Church to the world? “Ye are the salt,” not sugar candy—something the world will spit out, not swallow. Short and sharp was the utterance, “Let the dead bury their dead.” He was in awful earnestness!

Had Christ introduced more of the bright and pleasant elements into His mission, He would have been more popular when they went back, because of the searching nature of His teaching. I do not hear Him say, “Run after these people, Peter, and tell them we will have a different style of service tomorrow, something short and attractive with little preaching. We will have a pleasant evening for the people. Tell them they will be sure to enjoy it. Be quick, Peter, we must get the people somehow!” Jesus pitied sinners, sighed and wept over them, but never sought to amuse them.

In vain will the Epistles be searched to find any trace of the gospel amusement. Their message is, “Come out, keep out, keep clean out!” Anything approaching fooling is conspicuous by its absence. They had boundless confidence in the gospel and employed no other weapon. After Peter and John were locked up for preaching, the Church had a prayer meeting, but they did not pray, “Lord grant Thy servants that by a wise and discriminating use of innocent recreation we may show these people how happy we are.” If they ceased not for preaching Christ, they had not time for arranging entertainments. Scattered by persecution, they went everywhere preaching the gospel. They “turned the world upside down.” That is the difference! Lord, clear the Church of all the rot and rubbish the devil has imposed on her and bring us back to apostolic methods.

Lastly, the mission of amusement fails to affect the end desired. It works havoc among young converts. Let the careless and scoffers, who thank God because the Church met them halfway, speak and testify. Let the heavy-laden who found peace through the concert not keep silent! Let the drunkard to whom the dramatic entertainment has been God’s link in the chain of their conversion, stand up! There are none to answer. The mission

of amusement produces no converts. The need of the hour for today's ministry is believing scholarship joined with earnest spirituality, the one springing from the other as fruit from the root. The need is biblical doctrine, so understood and felt, that it sets men on fire.³

The Biblical Target Audience

So what's wrong with preaching to goats? In a word, it's *unbiblical*. Returning our attention to the biblical grid for church ministry recorded in Acts 2, we find no mention of goats included among the sheepfold when the early Church met "together in the temple courts" and "from house to house" (Acts 2:42; 5:42). How do we know that goats were not relevant to the church meeting? The answer is, as Luke points out, that the early Church "never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42b). Such a proclamation is reserved for sheep alone and is impossible for goats to understand (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:14; 12:3). Thus, rather than try to make their newfound religion of Christianity conducive to first century Palestinian goats, the early Church instead applied the words of the prophets—to "come out from them and be separate, says the Lord"—in order to distinguish themselves from the world (Isa. 52:11; Ezek. 20:34,41 cf. 2 Cor. 6:17).

Showering the attention of our church service solely on the unsaved—apart from altar calls and the summons to repent—tends to defang our sermons and secularize the worship meeting. More times than not, as recent evidence indicates, the tactics used by ministers such as Pastor Larry results in the commercialization of congregational worship, the distilling of the Bible of its difficult truths, the rejection of tradition and rich history, and the demotion of the local community from souls to consumers.

I am in agreement with Robert Louis Wilken, former professor of Church History at the University of Virginia. He takes issue with the seeker-sensitive infatuation with goats and notes its contradiction to the practices of the early Church in Acts 2:42-47:

I think seeker-sensitive churches use a completely wrong strategy. A [goat] who comes into a Christian church [that is, the sheep pen] for the first time should feel out of place. He should feel this community [of sheep] engages in practices so important that they take time to learn. The best thing we can do for 'seekers' is to create an environment where newcomers feel they are missing something vital, that one has to be inculcated into this, and that it's a discipline. Few people grasp that today. *But, the early church grasped it very well* (emphasis added).⁴

While it's certainly biblical to preach to believers and unbelievers alike—indeed we are commanded as a Church to preach to the *whole* world—it's unbiblical to design the church meeting around the peccadilloes of goats. Sermons are to be soul-pricking, not ear-tickling. Worship is to be theocentric, not man-centric. The Bible is to be taught, not merely referenced in passing. Doctrine is to be defined, not censured. And theology is to be promoted, not ignored.

In their effort to expand church membership, Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive leaders take it upon themselves to ensure that goats, not sheep, find comfortable grazing in the high places of the congregation (even allowing for gifted goats to serve in reputable billets). In their seeker-sensitive quiver are sermonic arrows that are purposely designed not to bruise; delivered by soft preachers who take advantage of their gift of gab rather than their call to preach. It's therefore not unusual for these preachers to deliver emaciated messages on Sunday while the goats in attendance look on approvingly and back-slap each other in glee. Consequently, the sheep are left out in the cold to grow deeper in God on their own; turned away with empty stomachs and without any clearer understanding of the Lord.

Spurgeon's words a century ago ring true today: "The mission of amusement produces no converts." To win over the goats and to satisfy the sheep, God is need of Bible-believing preachers, not stand-up comedians, pop stars, or Sunday morning parodies, who preach with fear and trembling the Word of God (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5).

The dangers inherent to petting goats with a view to winning them can be summed up with the wit of a local southern pastor who followed Spurgeon's train of thought. With his southern drawl smacking with irritation, he rightly concluded, "If you lure [goats] in with a hamburger, someone else will lure them out with a hot dog."

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ I have opted to use "Pastor Larry" as a pseudonym to respect his identity.

² Larry J. Michael. *Spurgeon on Leadership*; Kregel Academic & Professional (October 6, 2003); 111.

³ Extracted from *Entertainment in the Church*, edited by David and Tamra Lee, as cited at www.graceonlinelibrary.org.

⁴ Robert Louis Wilken; published in *Criquet* as cited at www.tomatkins.org.