

The Misguided Myopia of Critics Who Attack the “Seeker Friendly” Label!

written by Randy Starkey | 04/24/2017

Some time ago, I and Victory Church, where I pastored up until my retirement in January of 2019, were criticized on Facebook, mainly by a few, for being “seeker friendly”. I do refuse to enter into Facebook theological debates before a lost world that needs Jesus, especially with caustic commenters, as it’s the wrong platform, and actually some folks turn these things into pseudo “Christian wars”, which is so immature and childish and foolish. This blog post is what I said I would write after Easter (2017) in responding to the so-called “seeker friendly” critics. It’s a bit long, but for those who are really interested in this, I’m sure you will read it.

SIDEBAR: Let me say up front, we are not talking here about **“Cultural Compromise”**. I.e. taking a non-biblical position on sexuality, the definition of marriage, or some other area where cultural pressure is currently contrary to the Word of God. Victory Church will never do that. That is actually counterproductive to being “friendly to seekers”! We must speak the TRUTH, albeit in LOVE. Neither truth nor love are to be compromised. **That is the only way to genuinely help people!** When it comes to truth, I am well known at Victory Church as one who knows and boldly proclaims the truth of God’s Word. No compromise allowed! Plenty of “grace to grow”, but no compromise with sin or the devil!

Now, ironically, the label “seeker friendly” has been created by, and then criticized by, (that’s called a straw man) those who are against whatever they happen to define this as being! It is, however, such a misguided, myopic, misnomer of a label to criticize! It’s actually a hijacking of a great biblical and theological truth – JESUS IS SEEKER FRIENDLY!

For instance...

In Luke 19 we have the great story of Zacchaeus. He’s trying to see Jesus. He’s SEEKING Jesus! He’s short and can’t see over the crowds, so he climbs a tree (remember that Sunday School lesson?). When Jesus then walks by, he looks up and tells Zacchaeus to come down because He’s coming to his house to be a guest! In other words, Jesus was FRIENDLY to Zacchaeus! Jesus was “SEEKER FRIENDLY”! The critics have picked the wrong label to pick on, unless they want to NOT be like Jesus! My prayer is Jesus please make me MORE “seeker friendly” so I can be like more like YOU! What do you want to be if you are a seeker friendly critic? SEEKER UNFRIENDLY? That’s the true opposite of criticizing seeker friendly after all! I hope you don’t want to be that! But that’s the position “seeker friendly” critics put themselves in!

Zacchaeus was so excited to be able to have Jesus come to His house! He could sense Jesus’s love for him! The Scripture says in Luke 19:6 (NLT) **“Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy.”** The crowds (religious Jewish folk) did not like that at all! The Scripture says next in Luke 19:7 (NLT) **But the people were displeased. ‘He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,’ they grumbled.** So the stuck-in-the-mud religious folk judged Jesus

over His being friendly to Zacchaeus. And so it is today with so-called “seeker friendly” critics. Nothing different. Religion always judges love and relationship. I’ll take the way Jesus did it any day!

Jesus was accused by the Pharisees at another time of the same thing again, being a friend of sinners, in Matthew 11:19 (NLT) ***“The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, ‘He’s a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!’ But wisdom is shown to be right by its results.”*** In line with what Jesus Himself responded, I will let the results of a strong and healthy church speak for itself here at Victory!

The only difference for us now in the story of Zacchaeus, is instead of going to Zacchaeus’s house, we are inviting lots of Zacchaeus type folks, those seeking God, to OUR house, the church! The church was not around in Zacchaeus’ day. Our weekend services at Victory are now our front door to welcome guests into our house! Jesus said it this way in Luke 14:23 (ESV) ***“And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’*** How God loves the lost! Do we? Is our house filled as Jesus wants? Thankfully, it’s getting there at Victory by the grace of God! Any church that is not following what Jesus said here is simply missing the heart of God!! Read that verse above again and realize IT WAS JESUS THAT WAS SAYING THAT! Are we paying attention to Jesus, or are we stuck in our religious ruts??

Now, once we have guests in our house, how are we going to treat them? How are we going to minister to them? That is the job of each church to seek God about and to figure out what their weekend services should be like. It’s a known fact that 90% of people that come to Christ in America are saved in a church service, and usually because someone invited them, as the verse above points out.

So what do our guests need? They need to sense the love and presence of God which happens so much in our worship, be loved by the people there that already know Jesus, have their kids excellently cared for so they can enjoy the service, maybe give them a cup of coffee, pray for them if they need and want that, (in our services especially through our prayer teams we see healings and people set free and other answers to prayer all the time, and words of knowledge and wisdom and prophetic words also as God leads), and then to hear a message that can lead them to Christ, and doing it all in a reasonable time frame their brain and bottom can handle!

Now, if you see that differently, that’s fine, but the way ANY OF US will be able to judge our effectiveness as time goes on, is to take a look at what we have built! How healthy, strong, and effective (with lots of lost people being reached, believers being disciplined, the Word being solidly taught, with healthy relationships and families and marriages showing forth the love and character of Christ) is the church we have built? Luke 7:35 (The Message) says ***“Opinion polls don’t count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”*** If we’re building the church right, people will see it! Our church is not perfect by far, but it is a 35 year old healthy and growing church!

One of the criticisms of a so-called “seeker friendly” church (and we don’t even actually use that term!) is in essence that weekend service lengths should be long, and that every service should have plenty of tongues and gifts of the Spirit. That’s simply false. It’s BAD theology. It’s not biblical. It’s an over-fixation on the gifts of the Spirit and tongues. It can actually be idolatry, an elevation of the gifts of the Spirit higher than God ever intended! The apostle Paul warned about it when he said in 1 Corinthians 14:18-19 (NIV) ***“I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.”*** One of the things we see here is that the main use of tongues is in our private prayer life, not

in the church. The Corinthians were neglecting tongues privately and abusing them publicly! Then, Paul went on to say in 1 Corinthians 14:23 (NRSV) ***“If, 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 mind?”*** (Answer: Yes!) So, from verses like these, we can see Paul was very much concerned about how SEEKERS were handled in our services! He was seeker FRIENDLY, seeker AWARE, seeker SENSITIVE, whatever you want to call it! ***It should not be any sort of a label, it should be something we simply ARE in obedience to God’s Word! We CARE about relating to the lost in our services!***

I understand where these criticisms come from. Many Spirit-filled believers today come out of the Pentecostal or Charismatic movements where God was restoring the Baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit to the Church. The church was so dry then it needed that emphasis. I get that. We were also part of that move, and I love the power of the Holy Spirit and His gifts. But now it’s time for a fresh move! It’s time to USE the power we’ve received to truly produce weekend services that not only feed the flock, but that also reach the lost! You can’t do that if you’re speaking in tongues all the time, because as Paul said, they will think you are out of your mind! PLEASE READ THAT VERSE ABOVE AGAIN UNTIL YOU GET THAT! It’s time to let God dictate when and how the gifts are to function, instead of assuming things about them from the last move of God!

People from the last move always seem to fight the next thing God does. We need to realize that Jesus actually declared that the FIRST purpose of the power of the Holy Spirit is to reach the lost (***Acts 1.8***), NOT firstly to move in the gifts. Look at what Peter did on the day of Pentecost when God poured out His Spirit for the first time. There was wind, fire, the disciples were speaking in tongues, but actually those tongues were NOT heard as unintelligible tongues, but in the languages of the people, because God KNEW there were LOST PEOPLE there, and then Peter also IMMEDIATELY got up and preached the Word! And 3,000 were saved! He USED the power of God to PREACH! That’s what produced the salvations, not the gifts. The POWER resulted in PREACHING!

So, to say that every service has to be long and has to contain gifts and tongues etc. is simply religious legalism! GOD ALONE is the one who can tell us how HE wants our services to run! All services at all times are not all the same! Let’s quit putting God in some “gifts of the Spirit box” and let HIM tell us how HE wants our services to go!

To think that the Holy Spirit ONLY knows “in the moment” what He wants to do is REALLY narrow and bad theology! And it’s FALSE! He can give us plans and directions ahead of time for many aspects of our services, and for different kinds of services. Our Weekend services are not the same as our Power and Praise services, or our Seek Week services, or our Wednesday Night Prayer services, or our Power for Living nights, or our Growth Track, or our Bible teaching classes, or our Weddings or Funerals for that matter :-)! They are ALL different and the Holy Spirit instructs us about each of them! In ***Acts 16.6-7*** Paul was specifically FORBIDDEN BY THE HOLY SPIRIT to preach in two different areas. Aren’t we supposed to preach the gospel? Of course! Aren’t we to function in the gifts of the Spirit? Of course! But the Holy Spirit is quite capable of telling us how and when and what we should include and do in each type of service we do in our churches, including when He may NOT be putting the emphasis on the gifts. All our services are NOT to be spontaneous gift displays! God has different purposes for different services!

Again, the VERY FIRST REASON Jesus gave us for the power of the Holy Spirit (before gifts of the Spirit are ever taught on) was to be witnesses for Him, and it was to begin FIRST OF ALL in Jerusalem, which

represents OUR OWN COMMUNITY! (**Acts 1.8**). As we preach this way in the power of the Spirit, it is with one purpose in mind. Jesus is only building one thing, HIS CHURCH! (**Mt. 16.18**) Paul described himself as a wise master builder of the Church (**1 Cor. 3.10**). If we want to judge how well we are doing in following the Holy Spirit in our various services, as co-laborers with Jesus (**1 Cor. 3.9**), WE NEED TO LOOK AT WHAT WE HAVE BUILT! If we can't build a healthy church in our own community, we best not export it! Jesus said we would be known by our fruit (**John 15.8**). Paul said we would be judged by whether what we built lasted (**1 Cor. 3.13**). So many of the "seeker friendly" critics have never themselves built a healthy church! I am very thankful for the building of lives, families, marriages, the breaking of bondages and much more that has taken place in ever-increasing ways over the years in our own congregation at Victory Church!

Let's look at one more aspect of all this now. Paul's most concentrated discourse on the gifts of the Spirit (actually his only one really) takes place in **1 Cor. 12-14**. In the very final verse of **1 Cor. 12**, after Paul has described the gifts of the Spirit, he says this in 1 Corinthians 12:31 (NKJV) ***...earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.*** So what he is saying here is that there is a MORE excellent way than even the gifts! He says "yet" I show you... a MORE EXCELLENT WAY! You mean there is something higher than the gifts? Something MORE EXCELLENT than the gifts? Yes! Well... what is it? ...It's love!! Think about it... We appreciate gifts given to each other in our families, but we value LOVE in our families FAR MORE than any gift!! Paul said in the VERY NEXT VERSES after this in 1 Corinthians 13:1-2 (NIV) ***"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge... but do not have love, I am nothing."*** So what is love like? The beginning of the next verses introduce that with this... 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (ESV) ***"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful..."*** It is very similar to Paul's comparison of the fruit of the Spirit versus the works of the flesh in **Galatians 5**. The fruit of the Spirit, which we see in the life of Jesus, is given to us in Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT) ***"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!"*** Some works of the flesh, from **Galatians 5.19-21**, which we see in the lives of the Pharisees who were religious legalists and who challenged Jesus continually, and which apply to religious legalists today are...***"hostility (I've been called names and other real cool stuff :-)), quarreling... outbursts of anger... dissension, division... anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God."*** Just generally ornery people! So Paul summed it up in 1 Corinthians 13:13 (NLT) ***"Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love."*** Love is greater than gifts. Let's ask ourselves, how are we doing in the love of God? How are we doing in loving and reaching the lost? How are we doing in bringing them into the family of God? Or are we a rude religionist?

One final important biblical point. The gifts of the Spirit were not just for church services. We see Jesus operating in the word of knowledge in **John 4** with the woman at the well. He told her (after He made her thirsty for "living water" - Jesus always spoke to need first, before sin) all about her 5 husbands. This was everyday life, NOT a church service! Often we want everything to happen "in church", while Jesus wants it to happen in everyday life! The ONLY place we see the gifts of the Spirit taught on in the context of the church gathering together is in **1 Cor. 14**. In the early church these were house churches, and NOT large gatherings! That makes it easier to understand verses like this... 1 Corinthians 14:26 (NIV) ***What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has...*** That works in smaller meetings, but it doesn't work in a room of 500-1000 people, so obviously

the Holy Spirit has a different plan in larger gatherings. Each church must pray and seek God for themselves on what that means and how that works for their church, especially in weekend services. What we DON'T need is everyone running around judging each other's churches in these areas. That only smacks of pride, criticism, and religious legalism. Another translation of the flesh in Galatians 5:20 (The Living Bible) is... ***"...the feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own little group..."*** Paul simply said elsewhere to avoid those who are contentious and are divisive.

So, in conclusion, all of us at Victory Church are seeking to follow the Holy Spirit in all we do, in all our services, as well in every other area. **We are preaching the everlasting gospel and seeing great fruit in people's lives, and we are very excited about that!**

SIDEBAR: 3,800 pastors are in Birmingham, Alabama this week (Just prior to Easter 2017) that do church similar to what we do. One of those churches now beams their services into ALL the men's prisons in Alabama. So many guys are being saved! So awesome! The mark of good services!