

# — THE ABI REPORT —

*Applying Biblical Hermeneutics to Important Issues Facing the Church*

9/11/2009

## Church - For Those Who *Do* Like It

by Dave James

The following are examples of some slogans that are currently in use by churches in America (as reported on [www.poetpatriot.com](http://www.poetpatriot.com)):

*"Real church...Real People"*

*"The Church of Tomorrow...Today!"*

*"Equipping People for Life"*

*"The Small Church with a Big Dream"*

*"The Fortified City"*

*"A Church Where Miracles Happen"*

However, there is one slogan in particular that has gained broad usage in recent years:

*"A Church for People Who Don't Like Church"*

Although I understand what is meant and why it is used, something about this slogan just doesn't seem quite right.

Several important issues come to mind:

- Christ said that he was going to build his church (Matthew 16:18)
- Believers as a group make up the church as the body of Christ (Ephesians 5:23)
- Believers as individuals make up local churches (cf. the greetings and references throughout Paul's letters)
- Believers are instructed to consistently gather together for mutual encouragement (Hebrews 10:25) - which seems to be a reference to church meetings
- Most of the New Testament letters were written to functioning, organized local churches
- The instructions in Revelation 1-3 were specifically to churches in preparation for the revelation of Christ to the world and the coming judgment
- Everything related to the spiritual life of believers in the New Testament is in the context of the local church
- In the New Testament, it is assumed that believers need and desire to be together; to function as a loving community

gathered together in the name of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the body - which is the church

- Unbelievers receive virtually no mention in the letters to the churches except when they pose problems for individual believers or disrupt the normal life of the church through things like false teaching or improper behavior
- The structure, function and responsibilities of the local church is always defined in relation to believers, and in this regard unbelievers are inconsequential to the life of the church (It is not that they are unimportant for they most certainly are extremely important - to God and to believers, they are just not part of the church).

From these, we learn very important truths about the way a healthy, biblical church should function. We learn prescriptively (through commands) and descriptively (through examples) what churches should be like - what is important, what should be emphasized, how and why things should be done.

First, we learn that church is not something to be disparaged, nor minimized in any sense. It is central to the life of the believer as it facilitates one's relationship with Christ and with other believers. But this slogan feels a bit like a "bait and switch" - which does disparage church (at least as it has traditionally been understood) - but then offers church in its place. It is an unfortunate word play.

Second, we find that church is for believers, rather than unbelievers or even a mixed group. In fact, more than being just for believers, church is comprised of believers exclusively. Without believers, although there can be a gathering of people - even for religious reasons, it does not constitute a biblical church. Church is by and for believers alone. There is nothing in the New Testament that remotely indicates that the meetings of believers, i.e., local churches, are to be formed or function for the sake of unbelievers or to make them relevant to unbelievers. In fact, a biblical local church, by definition, will not be relevant to unbelievers, because deep spiritual truth is beyond the grasp of someone who has not been born again (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Conversely, to whatever degree a meeting is inherently attractive, understandable, relevant, etc. to unbelievers, to that degree it will cease to be a church meeting. This doesn't mean that we look for ways to be unattractive,

incomprehensible and irrelevant. But it is the work of the Spirit of God in the heart of an unbeliever that makes spiritual truth seem relevant to him or her. No amount of repackaging can accomplish this. And because of this, the contents of the package are usually what is changed. (This doesn't mean that there can't be meetings, conferences, seminars, etc. for the sake of reaching out to unbelievers - but that is a different function).

To be fair, the slogan in question reflects a legitimate and well-intentioned attempt to address various problems which include things such as stagnating or decreasing church attendance, ministering to believers who are immersed in a culture that is quickly moving away from Christian principles as the foundation for society, reaching the lost for Christ in the face of a deepening disinterest in all things Christian and a disdain for anything that smacks of promoting moral absolutes.

However, in the process of dealing with these things, the focus and purpose of the church has largely shifted away from being a place of encouragement and ongoing spiritual growth for believers. Instead, the mission of the church is shifting toward to creating a place and an atmosphere that is appealing and non-threatening to primarily the "unchurched" (the lost) and the "dechurched" (the disgruntled). In other words, the new "church" that is emerging is being specifically crafted to be a place for people who don't like church. This necessarily means that over time worldly philosophies and methodologies will ultimately overwhelm biblical ways of thinking and doing things.

But if believers are called to be separate, to come out from the world, to not be conformed to the world, to be in the world but not of the world, to avoid sinful or even questionable practices - then sooner or later, believers will be driven away from these "church" meetings as churches emerge and evolve into these new forms. Unbelievers may be seeking something, but no matter how it may appear they are not seeking God nor his righteousness (Romans 3:10-11). I fear that many have been deceived into making wholesale changes for the sake of unbelievers, while at the same time driving out untold scores of genuine believers who would dare to resist some of the more radical changes.

Consequently, the new "church" is no longer for people who do like church. This isn't to say that we shouldn't always be seeking ways to be culturally relevant. But being culturally relevant does not mean to constantly chase the latest trends and philosophies and bring them into the church so people can comfortably relate. To be culturally relevant is to be wise and insightful concerning how to apply biblical principles in such a way to affect change in the lives of believers when they are tempted to conform to ungodly cultural norms.

Unfortunately, biblical exposition tends to be one of the

first things that begins changing in the remaking of church so that it is more attractive to those who don't like church. Expository messages based on sound exegesis tend to give way to superficially-biblical topical messages dealing with the "felt-needs" of a primary target audience that is either unchurched or dechurched. On the one hand, this group cannot grasp spiritually deep truths and on the other, they are generally easily offended by terms like "sin," "wrath," "judgment," "hell," etc. Of course, unbelievers are welcome to come into a believers' meeting, but they will never become a part of the fellowship unless they clearly hear the gospel and the Word of God taught authoritatively and unapologetically.

When the centrality of the Word of God is diminished or even eliminated, then church is no longer for those who do like church. And believers should like church. This isn't about those who are simply against any kind of change for any reason. This isn't about self-centeredness. This isn't about fear of stepping outside of one's comfort zone. This isn't about a total lack of concern for a lost world.

However, the sad fact is that often those believers (who are often among the most mature) who do resist this emergence into a new kind of church and new kind of Christianity are regularly criticized and vilified - and many are even told that it would probably be better if they found another church.

Rather, it is about keeping church for born-again believers, because the church is born-again believers - and only born-again believers. It is about making sure that the church is always for people who do like church.

There are innumerable legitimate and creative ways for believers to be salt and light in the world - and reach the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believers can and should go out into the world, not isolate themselves from it in some kind of monasticism. But we don't reach the lost by transforming church meetings to model worldly thought and behavior. If we do, then there is nothing left to where believers can go for fellowship and to gain the strength, encouragement, knowledge and wisdom they need to be as wise as serpents, but as harmless as doves in a dangerous world of which our mortal enemy is its prince.

The biblical picture is of shepherding in such a way that none of the flock (who love being near the shepherd) are lost in the process of adding to the size of the flock. Unfortunately, much of what passes for modern church-growth methods amounts to little more than sending large parts of the flock over a cliff, just so they can be replaced by a new larger flock - that really doesn't know any better.

May we never be part of remaking the church in such a way that those who used to like church, no longer do.