

“How do I get my church to grow?”

The approach Paul took in Corinth, with people who are just like us today

I wonder what the response would be to an advertisement in the newspaper that went like this: "How would you like to come to a church that has no loud music, no emotion-packed worship service, no signs and wonders, and no stirring calls for revival or conquering the city for God? How about a church that offers no programs for church growth, no wonder-working formula for reaching the unchurched and no interest in making church more exciting to get people to come?"

It would be signing its own death warrant, right? What earthly hope would a church like that have in our post-modern, touchy-feely, experience-hyped generation of excitement seekers? It might appeal to a few old folks, perhaps, who are fed up with their church ditching tradition to appeal to the youth, but in churches hooked on keeping themselves alive and growing, who cares about the old folks? They'll be dead and gone soon anyway. The future is with the youth, and the young need excitement, emotion and programs to fit their every taste and circumstance.

But that's life in this culture, isn't it? "The church has to adjust or it will die," the church growth gurus keep on saying, "You'll never reach this sound-byte generation using the old methods of preaching; you've got to jazz things up. Post-modernists and Generation XYZers need attention-grabbing special effects to keep their interest, and worship services that lift the roof off. That's their world and the church had better learn to adjust or it will become an irrelevant relic, destined to die a slow and agonizing death, etc, etc." They do go on a bit these prophets of doom - but do they have a point?

Well, yes and no, according to the apostle Paul. On the one hand he said he became all things to all people in order to save them, but on the other hand he also said he didn't depend on clever techniques and human strategy to get people to respond.

Paul knew the problem well, too. He had to deal with the church in Corinth, an intellectually progressive, miracle-seeking, self-oriented, personality-worshipping group of Christians that post-modernists today would get along with famously. They'd be kindred spirits. So how did Paul deal with people who are so like people today?

His strategy was simple: "While I was with you," he wrote to them, "I didn't use any clever speaking techniques in my preaching. I concentrated purely on Jesus Christ and why he was crucified. I felt thoroughly inadequate myself and more than a little scared, so it wasn't my brilliant preaching that convinced you, it was the power of the Spirit. It clearly illustrates the point that your trust should always be in the power of God and never in human skill (1 Corinthians 2:1-5, BIV)."

Paul didn't resort to any psychological or emotional tactics to reach people because the Spirit would do the convincing through the gospel plainly preached. The results in numbers weren't that great - at the most there were probably only 60 Christians in the entire city of Corinth - but Paul wasn't in the numbers game anyway.

To him it was far more important to faithfully stick to the roots of the gospel message, and trust God to give the growth. It was God's church anyway, not his. And he knew Christ would complete in him whatever job he had in mind, so Paul didn't panic about the church not growing. It was truth, therefore, not growth, that Paul concentrated his attention on.

Advertising a church with "no frills and no thrills" might not be such a bad idea after all, then. At least you'd know the people turning up are there for truth, not gimmicks - and isn't it the truth that sets people free?