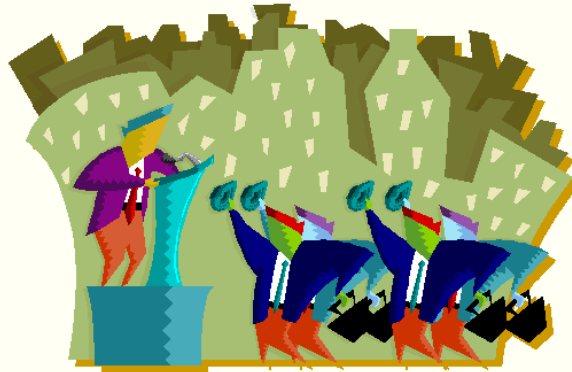


# My Soapbox



## **Can seeker-friendly schools be the door to disciples-only churches?**

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### ***Seeker-friendly churches***

The seeker-friendly church is a major phenomena with many Christians seeking to make their church attractive to those who visit. All kinds of practical considerations are addressed including smiles, service, security, safety, sensitivity and sincerity ([www.lifeway.com/staff\\_p0003.asp](http://www.lifeway.com/staff_p0003.asp)). However, a conscious effort is also made to ensure that the content of the services is understandable to the first-time or uncommitted visitor.

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SEEKER - a person, not a part of the church, whose tastes are, nonetheless, the most important.

SEEKER FRIENDLY - Style decisions more closely keyed to the tastes of the Seeker than in a Seeker Sensitive service.

SEEKER SENSITIVE - Anything designed around the tastes of a Seeker but intended to remain acceptable to the non-Seeker.

<http://www.modernreformation.org/mr95/janfeb/mr9501glossary.html>

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### **Some difficulties**

There is considerable discussion about whether it is possible to make the truth seeker-friendly although much of the emphasis is on presenting the truth in such a way that it is heard and understood so that it has a chance to be accepted.

However, even if the church is completely successful in finding the fine balance and is telling people what they need to hear in a way that they are willing to hear,

the public programs of the seeker-friendly churches are not designed to feed the committed Christian. Cell groups and other programs are used to provide teaching, but these have to compete for scarce time and often have significant numbers of seekers in them as well. The person who wants to grow in Christ and become a mature disciple may have a great deal of difficulty finding the teaching and mentoring that he needs because the seeker-friendly church isn't designed for him.

Another problem with the seeker-friendly church is its reinforcement of a common misconception about the meaning of church. The church is made up of all that have been born into the family of God and are part of the body of Christ. This group of people should definitely be friendly to seekers for they are Christ's ambassadors or representatives in the world. However, the building in which they meet is not the church, nor are the services held in the building church. Making the place and the services friendly doesn't automatically make the church friendly.

The typical group that is reached by the seeker-friendly church is the baby boomers. All sorts of programs are prepared to entice the unchurched to attend with special services provided for the children so that parents can enjoy the experience uninterrupted. Huge amounts of resources are invested in making the seeker-friendly services attractive and interesting. This is a responsive group, but exactly this same group would be the ones served by seeker-friendly schools.

The children are usually provided age-appropriate worship services, clubs, etc. but the "natural" distaste for anything related to school has, I believe, caused a de-emphasis of anything pertaining to teaching. The Sunday School is diminishing in popularity and when it is a church focus, it usually does not attempt to do more than teach Biblical content and application rather than anything resembling Biblical integration of all truth. The most responsive age group—the children—may not be the focus because that requires a long-term investment whereby adult ministries may appear to give more immediate return.

All of this effort to attract people to COME to some place and event where they will hear about Christ seems somewhat out of place considering Christ's command to GO (Acts 1:8). Rather than gathering together to "spur one another to love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24-25), the church now wants to gather the non-church to introduce them to Christ. Instead of preparing "God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12), the church uses its resources to attract people so that they can be served in the many programs provided by the church.

Unfortunately, this kind of perspective promotes the old secular/sacred heresy that divides life into two mutually exclusive areas—the valuable spiritual (sacred) "stuff" and the necessary ordinary (secular) "stuff." The Christian's time and energy are devoted to all sorts of special programs connected with the church building and little time is left to integrate the rest of life with Biblical truth. The "Christian bubble" can stretch to include more and more of the Christian's life, but it will burst before it is able to include everything. Huge chunks of the Christian's life are outside the sacred arena so the believer is left living a schizophrenic existence trying to balance the demands of his two worlds. Because

the teaching ministry of the seeker-friendly church is often diminished because it isn't stressed or it conflicts with the other programs, the Christian has few tools to address the problem even if he realizes that there is a problem.

It seems to me that the solution to the problem of how to reach the unchurched world is to provide seeker-friendly schools instead of seeker-friendly churches. Isn't it somewhat incongruous that we have strict entrance requirements for Christian schools while attempting to get as many people as possible to come to "church?" We are concerned that the children in Christian schools not be influenced by non-Christians while filling the pews with them and attempting to adjust all that is done to make them feel comfortable and interested in returning. This seems to be an attempt to make the school into the church and the church into a fold without walls. This seems to distort the purpose of both the church and the school. Even if it was the right model, it certainly raises the question why only 4-18 year olds need such a Christian school environment while adults need little or no Christian training. It is no wonder that the critics of Christian schools question their legitimacy because Biblical integration and Biblical teaching are often not seen as priorities for the non-school age believers.

### ***Seeker-friendly schools***

The reasons that seekers come to church are varied. Many come because they are seeking some kind of relationship to others, they enjoy the entertainment, or they appreciate the wide variety of services/programs that are offered. The chance that they come to be taught is rather small so the church has to look for every possible opportunity to insert some teaching without driving the seeker away. Seekers in a Christian school, however, come to be taught. Although they may not realize that the truth about Jesus Christ and His claims on all areas of life has convicting and transforming power, the stage is immediately set for presenting the truth in a friendly way.

There is definitely something to be said for having a "pure" environment even though Jesus warned us that it would be impossible to separate the Christians from the non-Christians (Matt. 13:24-30). Certainly the younger a child is the less able they are to discern error (Heb. 5:14) and we have a great responsibility to avoid anything that would cause them to stumble (Matt. 18:6), but a seeker-friendly school may be able to avoid these pitfalls at least as well as a seeker-friendly church.

Because schools are designed to be generally homogeneous by age, the influence in a particular class is from the school as a whole, the Christian teacher and classmates of similar age. There may indeed be individuals that are disruptive and corruptive, but the dynamics of a classroom are more likely to address the real needs of these students than a Sunday School or a "worship" service. Church activities are all optional and staffed by volunteers while staff and students in a school "have to" work to make the teaching/learning succeed. The church can choose to eliminate all potential troublemakers from all its activities, but that leaves little opportunity to introduce them to Jesus, the only one who can transform them from the inside out.

Some practical suggestions may eliminate many problems. Primary and intermediate classes tend to operate as fairly autonomous units so this should help minimize disruption from older students whose environment and choices have established negative patterns of behaviour. If it is found that there is a lot of negative influence from older students, the various grades could be separated even at recess and lunch time although you would lose much of the value of learning from older students and teaching younger students that occurs naturally and can be positively encouraged.

If students are only accepted in the lowest class (kindergarten or Grade 1), the students entering the system will usually still be relatively teachable so that the influence of a godly school can have a very positive impact. As they progress through the school they will learn godly patterns of behaviour and as they are born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they will have the power to live godly lives. If a student rejects the truth and resists its application in their lives, it would be critically important to consider the kind of support the parents provide in dealing with the student. If the parents are supportive and it is possible to cooperate in disciplining and training, retaining the student in the school should be possible.

If students apply towards the end of elementary school it is often because the parents have already begun to see problems and these students can be very disruptive. However, if the parents are committed to working with the school to see change, the Christian school has the opportunity to make a difference in lives that desperately need a loving environment which is anchored to absolute truth. It is easier to work with only "good" children, but Christ came to seek and to save the lost and love us even when we were enemies (Rom. 5:10, Col. 1:21). Careful screening of the applications and pre-admission interviews should enable the school to maintain godly standards while allowing non-Christian students and families to be a major part of the student body. However, because the school recognizes the responsibility of parents for the education of their children and doesn't want to put any child into the middle of a school-parent tug-of-war, it is important that parents understand the direction of the school before enrolment. Explaining the unique character of a Christian education is an evangelistic opportunity in itself even though it is impossible for the unregenerated mind to understand spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:14). However, the Holy Spirit can use the presentation of the truth to open hearts and minds in ways that are impossible if a person never encounters the truth.

The requirement for continued attendance is, therefore, parental support and this support is not just available from Christians. In fact, it is not unlikely that resistance will come from Christian parents. Every Christian school needs to be careful not to communicate that certain kinds of external behaviour equal godliness or are required to experience God's love, but they can promote acceptable standards for the dynamic learning community of the school. Many non-Christians are seeking standards in a world which has abandoned so many and it is these seekers that the Christian school should embrace. We cannot be responsible for the attitudes of anyone else's heart, but we should be willing to

include those who are willing to conform while all the while emphasizing the importance of attitude and the futility of external conformity—after all, even Jesus kept Judas Iscariot as a member of His intimate discipleship school even though He knew that his heart wasn't right and he was secretly a thief.

A school which provides a quality education which is founded on a unified understanding of reality will be attractive as an alternative to the fragmented and meaningless curriculum of most schools. The Christian school has the truth which answers life's questions so it will be attractive to those who are truly seeking because God has already begun the work of drawing them to Him. The love of Jesus demonstrated by those who know Him is the irresistible sign of His presence and will confirm the divine nature of what is taught and modelled by the Christian teacher.

Most of those who come to Christ do so by age 14 (up to 85%) with many of those who accept Him later having been introduced as children. For the church to ignore this opportunity to introduce children to Christ is to neglect one of the most powerful tools available for there is no other time in life when people are more receptive to the Gospel. Another time of openness is when people have young children of their own, but reaching adults at this time requires a massive investment in training to counter the godless education that they have received and the sinful experience that they have accumulated. They may well have a desire to train their children in a different way of thinking and living, but they will be unequipped by their past and ill-equipped by inadequate teaching from the present while grappling with the time, media, and vocational pressures of modern living. How much better to avoid the scars of sin by introducing children to Christ at an early age than to wait and have to attempt to undo all that the world, the flesh and the devil have done.

When the Sunday School was started in the late 1700's it had the purpose of training in literacy as well as Bible content, but as the struggle for the central position of God and His Word within education was fought and largely lost during the 1800's, the Sunday School retreated into a Bible-only school which reflected the dualism of a large majority of Christians who survived the war by separating life into the "sacred" and the "secular" instead of claiming all truth for Christ. Seeker-friendly schools would actively counter this dualistic viewpoint and establish God's truth as a transforming force within the culture rather than allowing people within and without the church to relegate truth to a special private, spiritual sphere.

But not only would the seeker-friendly Christian school have a preserving influence on its environment and an evangelistic impact on the unsaved, it would provide the training for a life-time of discipleship and establish the principles of life-long learning. If the truth be told, there may be more to the harmful character of the protective bubble than Christian schools have wanted to admit. It is easier and safer to be separate from the world than actively representing Christ in the world. It makes no sense to send Christian children to be trained by ungodly teachers who communicate directly and indirectly that God is non-existent or irrelevant. However, the opportunity to stand for what you believe in age-

appropriate settings could be very helpful. At least it would call the bluff of those who oppose Christian schools because they want their children to be a witness and to experience "the real world." The seeker-friendly school would be an opportunity to bring transforming life to the sin-twisted "real world" when it was supported by the church and families as a priority outreach.

Developing seeker-friendly Christian schools around the world might also help the cause of missions worldwide. MK education has often been a hard sell because it so often involves students having to be in boarding situations. If missions were involved in establishing Christian schools wherever they were ministering, there would be a lot more local options. If supporters understood that Christian education wasn't just a luxury item for "our own," but rather a necessity for everyone they might be a lot more interested in Christian schools. There is a basic inconsistency in the arguments for MK schools except for the English language needs of the MK returning to N. America, but even the language and cultural needs aren't so different for many nationals particularly in urban centers. The global economy, Internet, and modern media have made the cultures of urban youth much more homogenous than could have been imagined even a few years ago. Many nationals would love an English education because they see it as a ticket to financial security and immigration possibilities. Even if the motivation is poor, a seeker-friendly school would have the opportunity to give a whole new perspective by introducing the students to Christ and His priorities for life.

The political and business leaders which are hard to reach through normal methods would be some of the first to enrol their children and these people would be able to make the schools financially self-sustaining. Although such families shouldn't be the sole focus of seeker-friendly schools because of the "not many influential" principle (1 Cor. 1:26), they would enable the process to get started by giving cross-cultural Christian education experience, encouraging the development of culturally appropriate curricula, and providing a foundation for a wider school program. A very real danger to be avoided is the favouritism problem that has been with us for 2000 years (James 2:1-7). It would be easy to start with the "easy" situations and never move to provide Christian education for the poor and disadvantaged who may appear as a threat to the powerful and successful unless the seeker-friendly school has been successful in training disciples of Christ who have His perspective of serving others' interests rather than their own (Phil. 2:3-4).

If the church of Christ wants to produce disciples who will "turn the world upside down" (Acts 17:6 KJV), we need to do more than focus on personal salvation and spiritual "stuff" while ignoring the "secular" world in which the disciples have to live. The old Savior/Lord problem is really an expression of the rampant dualism which separates things like prayer, Bible reading, church attendance, and going to heaven where Jesus can be our Savior from the bulk of life where He demands to be our Lord. We try to figure out which things are His things and which things are our things instead of facing that fact that the real struggle is between His demand that we do **everything** His way and our desire to do everything our way.

I don't expect to usher in the millennium by bringing about a transformation of society, but if individual salvation doesn't produce any fruit (Rom. 7:4) there is certainly reason to question the reality of the professed salvation (1 John 3:10). Jesus told us that love would be the hallmark of His disciples and the authentication of their witness (John 13:35, 17:21, 1 John 2:5). Divine love expressed through us by the indwelling Holy Spirit will produce visible change in our lives as individuals and as a group. Solid, well-trained leaders for the future of the church and nations are the kind of people that will be developed when "from infancy" they "have known the holy Scriptures" (2 Tim. 3:15). The experience of missions in many parts of the world is that those who have graduated from Christian schools of the have been used to establish and protect the church. For instance, despite tremendous pressure, President Pervez Musharraf decided to support the United States strike against Afghanistan. "For generations, Christians in Pakistan have been plagued with persecution from Muslim fanatics in the name of Islam. The regime of present President Musharraf has been active in uprooting terrorism towards Pakistani Christians. For the first time in decades, Pakistani Christians are finally finding some relief from the terror of Muslim fundamentalists. President Musharraf was educated in a Christian school."

Although God in His grace can, and does, raise up people that come to Him later in life, the strong foundations laid early bear much fruit. When God in His sovereign plan began the church He chose to use Jewish people who knew the Scriptures to begin the process. Although the eschatological and theological reasons have been much discussed, it is also useful to note the practical value of choosing those who had a godly heritage to do something new in His kingdom. Even though Paul persecuted the church, God used the training in His Word that he received through his entire growing up process to bless the non-Jewish church. Often the first converts of an area were Jews or half-Jews, like Timothy, who had a Biblical education even though they didn't come to Christ until years later.

Throughout the Bible God has expressed His special love for the fatherless and needy (Deut. 10:18, Psalm 82:3), but often children with special needs aren't welcome in Christian schools because the schools feel ill-equipped to meet the special needs. However, the primary need of such children is a loving supportive school and the Christian school is exactly where such children should find the support that we need. If we maintain that special technical programs are of more importance than spiritual foundations for needy children we are in danger of compromising the Christian schools rational for existence. After all, who is to decide who can "do without" a Christian education? Surely those most at risk should be those who are first offered assistance. If special programs are necessary, Christians should be the first to develop and offer them to those in need. The example of NILD's program for those with learning disabilities should be reproduced wherever there is a special need.

Children at risk bring all kinds of problems with them, but what better opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ. It is easy to love those who love us return (Luke 6:32), but if Christian schools take the initiative to love the unlovely, they will be demonstrating divine love and the world around will begin to recognize that we

have indeed “been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). If “love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8), it will surely cover over a lack of facilities, technical skills and material resources that we often use as reasons for not welcoming the needy who come to us, let alone taking the initiative to meet the needs of those who desperately need to know that they are valuable because they are created in God’s image and continually loved by a heavenly Father who knows all about them and is sovereignly involved in their lives.

The seeker-friendly school’s roots go back to the very beginning of God’s organization of His people. Even in the Old Testament, Moses instructed that they “assemble the people—men, women and children, and **the aliens living in your towns**—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law” (Deut. 31:12). Not only God’s people were to be included in godly instruction but also those who chose to join them but hadn’t become part of them.

It was a big move for the Jews to understand that Gentiles could be Christians without becoming Jews. The apostles and early church wrestled with what was necessary for a person to believe and do to be a Christian. Schools will need to be prepared for the same kind of struggle. We have developed a Christian culture that is in many cases quite foreign to the world around us, even in “Christian” countries, but when going into non-Christian countries with seeker-friendly schools, we can expect that the challenges will be great—just as they are in mission churches. However, if the challenges prevent activity then all missions should cease, not just those that seek to reach the children through Christian schools.

The Roman Catholic practise of operating schools has certainly been a part of their success in producing a long-lasting commitment of people to that church that transcends cultural boundaries, languages and centuries of history. Muslim schools throughout the world have had a world-changing impact as they’ve trained young men to implement their vision of “God’s will.” If a religious system can be so effective using education, how much more could seeker-friendly schools accomplish with Christ-centered curriculum based on Biblical truth and empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It isn’t enough to produce loyal church members who depend on institutions for answers instead of developing a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe and our heavenly Father, but the same principles of using schools to prepare each new generation could still be very effective.

### **Problems**

There is a very real danger that people will think that salvation is by education. Those who have not received spiritual life will still be able to learn the “right answers” and it is often difficult in a school setting to evaluate whether truth has truly transformed a life, but the danger of knowing more than doing is always with us, even in an “all Christian” school. In fact the danger may be greater there because there is less challenge of comfortable truths that haven’t produced change. However, if the seeker-friendly school remains conscious of the danger it



can counter this pervasive lie of the enemy so that no student thinks that what they know or do will save them.

There is a temptation to aim for the rich in foreign cities because they are the most "like us" and neglect the poor. It is definitely better than nothing and organizations like NICS should be supported and encouraged to expand. At least international Christian schools would be a start and perhaps as much as we are now prepared to consider. The experience there could be invaluable in preparing national leaders who could develop authentically national Christian schools that would be expressions of Christ's transforming power in their cultures.

Teacher training is critical. Missionary teachers will be expected to be educational leaders and so they need to be thoroughly prepared to offer education that is Christian by nature. Loving, committed Christians are absolutely necessary, but they shouldn't just happen to do education. Church planters usually require a graduate degree in a ministry related area after their undergraduate work so they are effective ministers especially in a cross-cultural situation. It will require a similar dedication to produce Christian teachers who are prepared to minister, but if we get started with seeker-friendly schools in North America we will have people with experience who can more easily adapt to missionary situations. If everything that a Christian says isn't effective preaching, so everything that a Christian teacher does isn't Christian education. However, if seminaries seriously considered Christian school ministry as "church ministry" there could be a whole untapped group of ministers available for this strategic outreach. Also, if the church was convinced of the need and effectiveness of the seeker-friendly school, resources that are presently devoted to less effective ministries could be channelled into this ministry.

Government aid could be a significant "trap" especially in 1<sup>st</sup> world countries, but in most of the world it would require outside investment although it would be important to develop locally viable options that would be able to meet local educational needs rather than immediately striving for international accreditation. The example of Eastern Europe shows that Christians with "nothing" can do amazing things even though they continue to struggle with the need for teacher training and questions of government funding/relationships.

The experience of the past is a warning against any false sense of security that our Christian schools will never become confused and forsake their godly goals. However, doing nothing and trying to protect what we have instead of challenging the gates of hell is not an antidote. It is possible to be distracted when moving forward, but it is inevitable that we will fail if we stop going. The status quo isn't God's way and never has been for when we know where we are going, when we are going to arrive, and how we will get there, we don't need faith and so won't please God.

Many churches don't see the value of Christian schools but if Christian schools actively took the initiative they could at least slowly transform the thinking of the church. If schools wait until the church takes the initiative, nothing will happen. Those to whom God has given a vision of Christian education dare not wait to act

until God gives this gift to others. Those that understand the value and power of Christian education are already active in Christian schools and they will need to be the first to establish seeker-friendly schools.

### **Summary**

The Church calls individuals and families from all societies together into a new relationship that never existed before Pentecost. The body of Christ, like any body, is how Christ expresses Himself and accomplishes His objectives. The members of the body must function together for the body to be healthy and able to do what the head demands, but the purpose of the care and feeding of the body is not just to maintain its existence but to allow the head to direct it and use it. A body on life-support systems which maintain its life but are unable to restore its usefulness, is recognized by everyone as unnatural. Christ's body needs to grow and develop, be fed and cared for, so that He can accomplish His purposes among those who are not part of the body. Wouldn't it be surprising if He didn't ask His body to "let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). If they are seeking Him, His disciples should not stand in the way of letting them come to Him, even if all don't accept Him immediately, quickly or even eventually. He doesn't make His love conditional and neither should we.

## ***What is your response?***

What is wrong with my arguments? What am I missing? What have I misrepresented?

What empirical evidence is there that Christian schools make a difference?

What church, government and business leaders do you know that are the product of Christian schools?

What are the unique challenges of a Christian school with a high percentage of non-Christian students (at least at the beginning of each school year)?

What is the difference between teaching saved and unsaved children other than their behaviour?

Why were missions schools discontinued?

How can the mistakes/problems of the past be avoided?

What would prevent missions from establishing seeker-friendly Christian schools?

How can missionary and national teachers and administrators be trained to provide education which is Christian by nature and not just by name?

What questions need to be asked and answered?

How can we move from the present to a new paradigm in Christian education and missions?

What will you do to make it happen?

