

DUMBING DOWN THE CHURCH

By

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According to Dr. Larry Poston, the average convert to Islam is 31 years old while the average age of a convert to Christianity is 16 years old.¹ Why? Among many answers is this one by Gary DeMar, that the only gospel many people are hearing is “an adolescent gospel suitable for teenagers.”²

The term “dumbing down” has often been applied to the process by which we may be satisfied with less knowledge, less understanding, and less skill. It has happened in politics as we continue to elect people with charisma rather than people with integrity and wisdom.

It is happening in schools where they teach political correctness and lower test standards for the benefit of the education establishment.

But could it happen in the church, which scripture calls the “pillar and ground of truth?”³ Yes, it can happen.

It can happen when we try to make everyone “feel good” rather than bring them to grips with God and His truth. Feeling-centered Bible study is where the students discuss how they “feel” about scripture and the events related in scriptures, rather than learning the meaning of truth revealed and how to apply it. Many worship services are feeling-centered, with everything orchestrated and manipulated to pump up excitement and set each person on an emotional high.

Such emotional experiences convince many that they are right with God, when, in fact, they are alienated from him by sin and in need of deep repentance. Their good feelings often vanishes in the face of a hostile world and daily burdens.

True Christian faith is what makes one “feel good.” It is the result of knowing and believing the purpose of God as revealed. It is in knowing that the guilt and penalty of sin is gone,⁴ not because you feel it, but because God’s word promises it. It is knowing that God is present and will not forsake you, and that in the end there is a resurrection to glorious immortality in a perfect creation.⁵

Instead of seeking to feel good we need to seek the face of God and the truth of scripture which can make us free and give us lasting peace and joy.⁶

Dumbing down can happen when the ambition for church growth tempts us to focus on the externals and appeal to the natural (and corrupted) senses to attract people. Well did Dean Boelt observe, “There is more interest in building great edifices and calling them the church than of edifying the worshipers and calling them the church.”⁷

Conversion begins with a message, the heart of which is the death and resurrection of Jesus. His death can be understood only in the context that sin is rebellion against the Creator, and therefore an evil requiring the death penalty which fell of Jesus at the cross. But such a message seems too harsh for modern ears. Under the socialist credo that “the end justifies the means,” various incentives are used to attract people to Christ, but to tell anyone that he is actually worthy of death for his sins is no longer “religiously correct.” So one becomes a Christian with no sorrow for sin, no tears of repentance, and

no consciousness of the change required to follow Jesus. Church membership grows, but its quality diminishes.

Dumbing can happen when the great hymns of profound thought are replaced with short mediocre choruses which can be chanted with no thought at all.

The hymns which have had great influence in Western civilization in the Christian era have consisted of great thoughts about God, and what He has done through Jesus His Son. They not only teach, but help us to express our faith and give us a frame on which to hang precious truths where they can easily be recalled. Luther's hymns were so filled with Christian thought that his enemy the Roman Catholic Cajetan was driven to confess, "By his songs Luther has conquered us."⁸

Great hymns, filled with Biblical metaphor and inspiring truth, and set to music in its classic forms, are replaced with a chorus of only two or three phrases, which are repeated over and over and over and over. Our children are being robbed of a great heritage. If they are not challenged to apply their minds to learning the words and music of these hymns, they may never be able to join in singing from memory "What A Friend We Have In Jesus," "The Old Rugged Cross," or "Blessed Assurance." And how can they find comfort in time of sorrow by recalling the words to "God Will Take Care of You," or other hymns of peace and comfort, when they had no opportunity to learn them? Rather they are exposed only to a form of music which requires little or no thought and no musical skill other than three chords on a guitar.

The dumbing process can happen when Sunday School lessons consist of a review of the denominational Sunday School quarterly instead of an open study and discussion of the Scripture.

Lesson quarterlies are designed to uphold the traditional views held by the churches using that particular publisher's material. Examine the lesson for the same Sunday in the Baptist, Methodist and Christian Church Quarterlies, and you will find the same printed text, but each lesson interpreted to uphold the party line of that particular group. Yet, it is almost unheard of for anyone to question the teachings of the Sunday School quarterly. To raise an issue for discussion might cause controversy, and controversy is taboo in the modern church.

This discourages serious study of the scripture, and leaves some of the most vital subjects unexamined. As one reads the Bible through the filter system of the "prepared" lessons, he becomes immune to any other truth that might be there, and after a while he ceases to learn anything at all. This process has gone on for generations, until zeal for searching the scriptures has almost vanished, and studying the Bible is left to the professionals.

When I was asked to teach the Adult Bible Class in one church I had just begun to serve, I agreed to do so on condition that we abandon the Sunday School quarterlies and study the scriptures verse-by-verse straight from the Bible. While some doubted that we could manage without quarterlies they finally agreed, perhaps because no one else wanted to teach. After one year many said that they had learned more in that year than in many years of following the lesson quarterly.

This was not due to the teacher's skill, but to the fact that they had actually studied the text itself, rather than the interpretations of a lesson writer with his own sectarian bias, and his need to please the publisher of the quarterly.

There isn't space to mention all the ways by which the dumbing down process takes place. It is probably safe to say that none of it is deliberate but is the result of the efforts of people of good intentions. I shamefully confess that I have contributed to the process by following or promoting the generally accepted policies and activities. But after giving up the "clergy" status several years ago I can view the process from a different and wider perspective, and am saddened by the view.

The preachers I know are sincere hard-working servants of Christ but are handicapped by a system that little resembles the *ekklesia* of the New Testament. What is needed is a **radical reformation of the entire church**, a transformed body that is not seen as part of the world, but as a light **to** the world.⁹ This means to discard entirely the world's pop psychology of self-love/self-esteem/self-worth which colors worship, preaching and so many other facets of the church. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of **me**."¹⁰ Peter sums it up: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."¹¹

It means restoring the radical nature of conversion. When Jesus called a young man to discipleship, He demanded that he give up that which he loved most, and promised nothing in return but eternal life. Sorry, no fun and games! True joy comes from God and not Disney World. Jesus offers self-denial and a cross.¹² This is the challenge today's young people are seldom given.

We must raise our sights, "looking unto Jesus...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."¹³

"And be not fashioned according to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."¹⁴

When will the dumbing down stop and the transformation begin?

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