

The EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN Church

by Wes McAdams

I recently read a blog post titled, “Why Are Churches of Christ Shrinking?” The author’s premise was that congregations of the church of Christ are shrinking because they fail to recognize a shift in our culture. “Younger generations,” the author says, “come into our worship services looking for an *experience*. And what do they get? A lecture. Information.” The author claims the churches of Christ will lose many of our 18- to 35-year-olds if we do not adopt what he calls an “experience-driven church” model.

As a member of the church of Christ, and one who falls into the 18- to 35-year-old group, I have something to say about this.

First, to a certain extent, I agree with him. After all, we live in a culture that is experience-driven. People value experiences. Theme parks, rock concerts, movie theaters, etc. – all of these capitalize on our experience-driven culture. All reports indicate that our economy is in a poor state, yet you would not know it by looking at ticket sales. People still line up around the block and fork over unbelievably large sums of money for an experience.

Is it any wonder that this experience-driven culture is looking for an experience-driven church? It is inevitable that those religious groups who are willing to offer an emotional experience, specifically tailored to young people, will likely grow numerically in our current experience-driven climate.

The Appeal of an Experience

Here are three reasons emotional experiences appeal to the masses:

(1) An experience does not challenge. An experience does not force you to alter your thinking, your life or your behavior. An experience simply makes you feel while asking nothing in return.

There were certainly experiences in biblical times; even back then, the crowds loved a good experience. The Israelites miraculously crossed the Red Sea; that would have been quite the experience, wouldn’t you say? After crossing, they sang, danced and played the tambourine (Exodus 15:1-21). But just a few short verses later (when life brought challenges), the same crowd was dissatisfied (v. 24).

When Jesus fed the 5,000, healed the sick, and raised the dead, people flocked to Him. But when Jesus challenged them, the experience-driven followers left (John 6:66). Only a few remained – the ones who knew He had the “words of eternal life” (v. 68 ESV). In other words, those who stayed were those motivated by faith, not mere experience.

(2) An experience has no boundaries. The aforementioned blog post encourages churches of Christ to incorporate mood lighting, video, music, body movement and social media into the “worship experience.” I’m sure the author is right; this kind of experience will draw a crowd.

But here’s something to consider: Experience-driven churches will never be able to keep up with others in their experience-driven industry. MTV and Disney will always have more money and, thus, be able to provide a more engaging experience. Those are the kinds of groups with whom these experience-driven churches are trying to compete. They will always struggle because

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people will always want brighter, faster and more exciting experiences. After all, an experience has no boundaries.

However, when did our goal become to provide the most engaging experience in town? I thought our goal was to please our heavenly Father (2 Corinthians 5:9). Although experiences have no boundaries, our heavenly Father does: “For God is not a God of confusion but of peace … all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). The question is not “What experience can we offer to keep people here?” The question is “What can we do to communicate our praise to the Father in a way that is well-pleasing to Him?”

(3) An experience validates. Experience-driven churches leave their members feeling validated and justified. The crowds interpret their good feelings as an indication from God they are doing all right. People can go out on Saturday night, doing whatever they want, but if they have a good “worship experience” on Sunday morning, they feel as if God

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BODY MOVEMENT

MOOD LIGHTING

EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN

VIDEO

has stamped His approval on them, saying: “You’re still in my grace. You have nothing to worry about.” However, this is what His Word says:

“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:3-6).

The test for being in Christ has nothing to do with feelings or a good experience in worship. The test has to do with faithfulness, doing our absolute best to keep His commandments and walk as He walked.

Should We Become an Experience-Driven Church?

I am not advocating an emotionless, stoic spiritual existence. I am not saying there is nothing to be

“experienced” in New Testament worship. What I am saying is this: The church of Christ cannot be experience-driven. If we are Christ’s church, we must be driven to please Him. In pleasing Him, we will have a substantive experience, rather than a shallow emotional experience.

Pleasing God is experienced by faith rather than by a physical or emotional experience. I cannot yet see God’s smile when I please Him. I cannot yet hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” I cannot yet feel His loving hand upon me, patting me on the back. But by faith I have an assurance and conviction of the things I cannot experience with my flesh (Hebrews 11:1).

I believe the church is at a pivotal moment in history – a point at which we must make a decision. We must decide by what we will be driven: by faith or by experience. We cannot choose to be both faith-driven and experience-driven; those are mutually exclusive motivations.

I am reminded of Elijah’s words

on Mount Carmel: “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). It is time we decide. Will we let people’s emotional experiences dictate how we worship God, or will we allow His Word to dictate how we worship Him?

As for me, I will not put my confidence in the experiences of the flesh. Nor will I encourage others to do so by promoting an experience-driven religion. Instead, I will teach and preach the religion of Scripture; the religion of faith in Jesus Christ. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). □

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