

Identity Crisis: It's Not About What We're Selling.

WEEK FOUR:

Most businesses are concerned with keeping customers. That's because it is by far cheaper to retain a customer, than it is to go out and drum up a new one. So most companies want to keep current customers happy and coming back for more.

While that makes a lot of fiscal sense, if a company isn't careful, it can begin to tailor its energies completely towards those on the inside, rather than continuously looking to who might still be on the outside. Like a club that only exists for its members, companies or groups that focus on those on the inside can quickly become out of touch with the world around them.

Unfortunately, this is how much of the church has become. Perhaps unintentionally, we've created insular spaces and communities that simply support those already on the inside. And we like it that way. It's comfortable and easier, less messy, and a lot less expensive.

It also means we're failing at our entire purpose and mission.

The church should be the one place designed to focus outward. Being an insider should mean that you are tuned to the needs, pain, hopes, and joys of the world around you. It was for the world that Jesus came, lived, died, was raised, and led his followers. So why would Christians not think we needed to be for the world as well?

It's not quite that simple though, for us Christians. For example, even if a company does focus on the outside, it's almost always with the goal to bring people in. Naturally, that's what a company trying to sell a product does. The problem is that can lead to all sorts of maneuvers, manipulations, guerrilla advertising, political leveraging, and downright lying to get people to buy a certain product, instead of depending on the value of the product itself.

Instead of selling a product they actually believe will make people's lives or the world around them better, some companies just want to make a profit.

As far as the church goes, of course we want to invite people into a relationship with God, through Christ and the Holy Spirit! We believe without a doubt that a relationship with God makes us complete as human beings the way nothing else can, and that it has eternal implications. But as Christians, we have to be careful not to be so focused on getting people in, that we forget to care about the people themselves. In fact, as Christ did, we should focus on caring for people regardless of whether or not they ever come through our doors. That's what it means to love someone unconditionally, which is how Jesus loves all of us.

A pastor told a story of encountering someone in just this type of situation. This pastor spent his mornings in a local restaurant, talking to folks, listening to their stories, and simply getting to know them. None of the employees or regulars ever attended his church though and there was one particularly negative man who no one enjoyed being around. Week after week, every time the pastor encountered this man, he was rude and dismissive, brushing off any attempts at connection.

One day, that man's son died in a horrible accident with a gun nobody realized was loaded. Out of his grief, he shared his pain and devastation with the pastor. He had been in the army and had fought in Vietnam. He had done many things he believed were unforgivable, and wanted to know if this was punishment for having killed children over there. This pastor comforted him, assuring him that what happened was not God's punishment.

Later this man asked the pastor to speak at a private gathering in honor of his son. After the fact, the pastor wrote, *"I have been going to the [restaurant] regularly for over three years now. Sometimes I wondered if I needed to continue going... If you go by traditional church metrics, my time investment has not led to 'church' growth or increased 'numbers in the pews.' It has not resulted in one penny going into our offertory plate... But God, through just being faithful, has given me an amazing opportunity; to be welcomed into their house... and share the love of God with them. And that is my heart's desire, not to see them as an 'evangelism opportunity' but a family in pain that simply needs the love of God, and to love them. I pray I may honor this."*

In the book of Acts, it tells the story of the early church. We hear that they spent their time devoted the teaching of the church and to being together, eating with glad and joyous hearts, praying and worshipping, and in general having fellowship together. They would heal people and care for people. The texts say that they had the goodwill of all the people. Everyone liked them! They were good to be around, and people were grateful for their presence. And because of that, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Act 2:42-47)

They weren't hiding out in their buildings, worshipping amongst themselves, and only engaging with one another. They were out-and-about in places, engaging with all sorts of people. And because of who they were and how they treated others, more people joined up.

Other people becoming Christian is most often a result of Christians living the way they are supposed to. Christianity is attractational, and invitational, and compelling. It shouldn't be forced or manipulative or nominal. Christianity really isn't about getting a bunch of people to wear a logo tee, it's about being willing to give other people the shirt off your back. People buying in is a natural result of living true to the image of Christ.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to love and care for someone unconditionally?
- Have you ever felt like someone was trying to manipulate or force you to buy into something?
- Have you ever done that to someone else? What was the result?
- Who will see your life and decide to follow Jesus?
- Do you have the goodwill of all people even if they're not Christian?