

What Should Visitors Hear When They Visit Your Church?

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Picture this: A man and his wife visit our assembly because of a personal invitation or merely because they noticed our building and are shopping around for a church. This could be their *only* visit. What should they (and every visitor) know after hearing a message from our pulpit? If you imagine yourself as a visitor to your own worship assembly, what do you imagine would be your impression? How could your interest be drawn and what might make you desire to learn and be brought one step closer to salvation?

Actually, worship assemblies of Christians aren't fundamentally designed to attract visitors, and they shouldn't be. They are designed by God for His eyes and ears, and for His praise. They are designed for Christians to sing to God and to one another (Eph. 5:19) as they teach and admonish one another. They are designed for a church of Christians to exhort one another (Heb. 10:25), to grow from doctrine, to enjoy fellowship, to eat the Lord's supper and to pray together (Acts 2:42). Worship is about glory to God and Christian edification. Preaching ought to reflect that purpose.

You may think of some New Testament preaching that was not especially designed for Christians, yet these are not generally examples of Christian worship assemblies. When Paul was in Athens in Acts 17, his sermon was especially fitted for the ears of unbelievers because that's who was present. The same was true of Stephen's lesson in Acts 7. But when the *church* is assembled for worship, that assembly isn't really geared toward visitors. It's an assembly of Christians worshiping God in a place where visitors are welcome to come and observe and even to participate in small ways.

It seems to me that some negative things happen to a church that primarily designs worship around visitors and enticing them to come back. Preaching becomes lighter and is never confrontational. Our shepherding leans less on restoring the fallen and more on Sunday numbers. Our worship makes Christians think more about what appeals to people's senses and less about what appeals to God's heart. Our real focus becomes distracted and more about marketing.

Yes, we should invite visitors to our assemblies and encourage them to obey, just as our first century brothers and sisters must have enjoyed doing. Visitors to the assembly are rarely seen in Scripture, but **it seems obvious to me that they were sometimes present.** It's just natural for a Christian, privately studying the Bible with an unbeliever, to soon invite him to come and see Christians worship. Paul may have had visitors in mind in 1 Corinthians 14:16 when he worried that the uninformed would not be able to understand or learn truth if speaking in tongues was not regulated. James refers to hypothetical visitors in James 2—one wearing poor-man's clothes and the other dressed in rich clothing.

Good elders will often consider the typical worship assembly of the church through the eyes of a first-time visitor. We want them to have a positive and pleasant experience which will lead to or enhance a one-on-one study of Scripture. Yet, in the context of what I've just written, a **visitor is just that**; one who recognizes that this is a meeting of people who belong together as a family in a common cause. In essence, **he is an outsider, watching and listening to their meeting, and he is welcome.**

Here's what a visitor should never see nor hear:

- An auditorium where the back seats are crowded and the front seats are empty suggesting a resistance, or at least an apathy toward the preaching, instead of an excitement.
- A sea of Christians looking the other way in the foyer and parking lot instead of their smiling faces and hands outstretched to greet and talk with them.
- Gossiping women in the pew, portraying a faith that is repulsive to most people (and to

the Lord, 1 Tim. 5:13).

- A preacher who thinks sermons should be in a scolding tone or screaming volume instead of clear, reasoned communication.
- A meeting place that smells musty and unkept like it's not used very much, communicating a low value placed on worship.
- A Bible class taught by someone who obviously didn't prepare a Bible lesson.
- Singing that expresses apathy and prayers which are big on cliches' and small on heart-felt reverence and faith.

Now back to the matter of preaching. On any given Sunday, a visitor to our worship assembly should observe one or more of these six things in our preaching:

First, he should hear preaching designed to immunize Christians to possible outside threats.

Wisdom demands that some of our sermons are pre-emptive strikes against sins in the world which are inching ever closer to God's family. Knowing there is a time when "people will not endure sound teaching" (2 Tim. 4:3), preachers must forecast the kinds of spiritual threats that are looming on the horizon.

Second, he should hear preaching of passages and applications from the pulpit which emphasize hope.

Our hope is called our helmet of salvation (Eph. 6:13) and it protects our spirits from being lured into worldliness. Christians need to be frequently and richly fed on the passages of hope: "And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life" (I Jn. 2:25). "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:1). "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin" (Rom. 4:8). If he doesn't hear that, why would he want to obey the Gospel and become a part of this spiritual family? We need to declare with confidence that faithful, active members of the church truly are saved.

Third, he should hear a preacher who has a clear dependence on Scripture.

The heart of all his sermons is a unchanging bedrock that the Bible is the word of God and we are interested in not just the broad teaching, but in the details of Scripture. Because the visitor is perhaps new to this, he may not understand every concept he hears, but he will

talk to his friends later about the church's interest in adhering to the Scripture for all they believe and do. "They really preach the Book."

Fourth, he should hear an interesting sermon.

Visitors should never hear a boring sermon. At least if it is boring to him, it should be because he still hasn't developed an appetite for the gospel; never because the preacher just didn't put enough effort into preparing a meaningful, Biblical lesson with interesting and practical applications and illustrations. If he returns, he should soon see a pattern in the preaching— a predictability of sorts. It's not that the sermons all sound alike. (One man compared their weekly sermons to Mexican food; the same ingredients each week, just mixed different ways.) It's that the sermons are always well-prepared and consistently Bible-based. It won't take him long to notice that most sermons begin with, "Turn in God's word to..." or "If you want an outline of my sermon you can have it by leaving this passage open on your lap." Millennials, the most frequent visitors at many congregations, are sometimes known for a few negative qualities, but one good one to which we should pay attention is this: They are looking for authenticity in religion.

The more a visitor attends, the more he will hear discussions of diverse subjects and see a balance that makes Biblical application to many aspects of life. One Sunday he'll hear about the fundamental doctrine of the New Testament, the next, he will hear about hope, the next, about how we are to treat our enemies, and the next about how to worship acceptably. This is a pulpit that's about edifying (1 Cor. 14:26).

Fifth, he should hear sermons which do not unnecessarily offend, and yet do not apply the lemon-scented polish of current political correctness.

He should hear the fearlessness that fills a man when he's convinced that what he is saying is from God and that people must hear it to please their Creator. Oh, that God would give us more preachers like Stephen (Acts 7), or Paul (Acts 17:17-31). We need preaching that moves people to fear God more than men (Acts 5:29). The word of God is dynamite. It's like a sword that pierces through the joint and marrow (Heb. 4:12). A preacher's tone can be kind while his words are sharp because they come from the One who will judge us after the trumpet blows (2 Cor. 5:10, 1 Thess. 4:16).

Sixth, a visitor should hear preaching about the organization of the church and how it will impact his life if he becomes a Christian and worships with this congregation.

1 Peter 5:2 says to elders, “Feed the flock of God which is among you.” This is the reason that, in our congregations, we practice “placing membership.” There must be a communication from a visiting Christian, to the shepherds of a congregation, that he wants to transition from being a visitor to being a member.

Wrapping it up

Jule Miller, who created the filmstrips which were hugely successful a few generations ago in helping common Christians evangelize, often said that people who visit our assemblies are the highest quality contacts we will have. Let’s always make sure that what they hear and see will in no way dissuade them from wanting to serve God in their lives.