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The Anti-Christian, Antichurch, Post-Christian Seeker

“Not all who wander are lost.

—J. R. R. Tolkien

+ “Hello. My name is Sky, and I’m not a Christian.”

Twenty-four-year-old Sky walked up on the stage during our Sunday night worship service and stood next to me. Sky was creative and artistic, an intelligent thinker who majored in photography at the University of California Santa Cruz. He had an introverted personality and was a little nervous, but he courageously stood beside me, dressed in his polyester Santa Cruz retro-artist fashion attire and displaying great, extended sideburns (which I personally admired). I handed him a microphone, and he began to tell his story with a plain and direct statement. “Hello. My name is Sky, and I’m not a Christian.”

I could feel the ripple of surprise coming from the people as his words sank in. I suspect that many were expecting to hear Sky share a testimony of how Jesus had changed his life. But on this night, we had been talking about the importance of having true friendships with those who are not church attenders. I had been explaining how Jesus spent time with nonreligious sinners (Matt. 9:10). What better way to teach on this subject, I decided, than to hear the perspective of someone who doesn’t believe in the Christian faith? Someone who would actually be considered a nonreligious sinner.

Sky stood there in front of several hundred of his peers and told them why he was not a Christian. His reasons, sadly, echoed those I had heard,



and continue to hear, over and over from people in emerging generations whenever Christianity is brought up.

✝ **“Christianity is a man-made organized religion.”**

Sky shared how he was raised in a nonreligious home. His parents, who had divorced when he was young, never encouraged him to attend church. In fact, they were rather distrustful of Christians and had rejected the church. As Sky grew up, he was taught by his parents to intelligently think for himself, and his own observations led him to believe that Christianity was a man-made organized religion filled with man-made rules based on opinions and politics.

+ **“Christians are close-minded, judgmental people.”**

From all he had experienced, Sky felt that most Christians are closed-minded and judgmental. Whether the issue was sexual, ethical, or moral preferences, Christians were always ready to point out how others were wrong and how they were always right. He shared how he strongly felt it was silly for the church in this age to cling to its dogmatic opinions. He felt that Christians were very shallow thinkers to believe that they had the only true answers.

✝ **“Christians are arrogant to think they alone have the only true religion.”**

Sky shared that in his viewpoint, all religions and worldviews should be considered of equal value and beauty. He felt that the criticism and condemnation he had heard Christians inflict on nonbelievers was harmful and inexcusable. He shared that it really is arrogant to think that Christians alone have the one true religion and the only way to God. For all of these reasons, he testified, he not only rejected Christianity but was actually repelled by it. Although he described himself as a very spiritual person, he made it clear that Christianity was one of the last religions he would ever consider following. He offered his perspective on Christians as a word of caution to those there that night, lest they make these mistakes in their interactions with others like him.

But Sky’s story wasn’t over yet.

✝ **Some “very different and unusual” people**

Recently, about two years after the night he had shared his “anti-testimony,” Sky joined me in front of his peers once again on another



Sunday night. Like the first time, Sky spoke into a microphone, but now we were standing waist deep in water in the baptistry. This time, instead of explaining why he wasn't a Christian and the reasons he didn't believe, Sky boldly and passionately declared, "I love Jesus and want to serve him with all my life."

Although he still looked the same with his very cool extended sideburns (although he wasn't wearing his usual polyester in the baptistry), this was quite a different Sky than the one who had stood on the stage two years ago. I could sense his passion as he shared what had occurred in his life. He even had to stop talking for a brief moment as his voice choked with emotion. Sky's story didn't include any type of major trauma, nor had he hit bottom in some area of his life. He simply told the story of how he met someone where he worked who introduced him to a few Christians who were what he called "very different and unusual" people.

Sky shared that as he got to know these particular Christians and became friends with them, for the first time he had actually seen Jesus in people who claimed to be his followers. He said he hadn't expected that there could ever be a group of Christians whom he felt he could relate to. He said that the way they befriended him and lived their lives for Jesus in front of him, despite their even knowing what he believed, caused him to think. He said that this is what eventually led him to regularly go to the place where they gathered to worship on Sunday nights.

+ **Compelled to be in the presence of believers worshipping**

Standing in the baptistry, Sky thanked everyone present that night for the part they had each played in his decision. He explained that they were the first Christians he had ever seen actually worshipping God in a seriously spiritual way. He told them how much it impacted him when he would come on Sunday nights and see people his age singing songs of joy to God, praying on their knees, and taking Jesus very seriously. He never realized that Christians seek and encounter God in this way. It was a very unusual thing to him, seeing this, and it was so unlike anything he had ever experienced that he felt compelled to keep coming back. He said he was haunted by the images of people worshipping like they were, so he kept returning.

Sky told everyone how eventually one Sunday night, during a time when we allowed people to sit quietly and reflect and pray, he made a decision. Sky particularly liked the times of silence and heart-searching in the worship service. On this evening, while sitting at a table, he realized



that he wanted to know the Jesus that he was experiencing through his friends and on Sunday nights at the worship service. He told everyone how he bowed his head into his hands and prayed (I quote Sky word for word here), “Lord, I don’t understand everything that it is to follow you, but I have seen your power at work in other people and felt your presence. I want you to be my savior and to be the center of my life.” Sky shared how he later found out that at the very moment he was praying, his friends were sitting nearby, all intensely praying for him.

✝ Sky’s story didn’t end with a salvation prayer to get him to heaven

Sitting in one of the first rows that night as he spoke from the baptism were Sky’s mom and dad. Although neither are Christians, they came to watch their son’s baptism, knowing how much it meant to him. Sitting near his parents were Rod and Connie Clendenen, Sky’s midweek Bible study leaders and spiritual mentors. Rod is eighty years old, and he and his wife, Connie, open their home every Wednesday night to lead a group of primarily twenty-somethings in in-depth studies of various books of the Bible. Rod and Connie have become a big part of Sky’s life, even though he and they are generations apart in age. Sky felt that as he explored Christianity, he needed to seriously study the Bible. In fact, he had made a commitment to read through the entire Bible before his baptism. It took him nearly two years, but he did it. Sky now helps lead his Bible study from time to time and is passionate about aligning his life with the teachings of Jesus. Sky constantly is allowing other nonbelievers to see how God transformed his life and makes it a point never to get too consumed with “church” at the expense of those who need to see Jesus in him now.

+ Evangelism to an anti-Christian, antichurch, post-Christian seeker

After I baptized Sky that night, people applauded and praised God with great enthusiasm. A young nonbeliever with strong antichurch and anti-Christian views had been transformed into a devoted follower and disciple of Jesus. And it had happened quite outside the lines of the modern “seeker-sensitive” prescription for church growth.

There are two ways of understanding the term seeker-sensitive. My use of the term in this book could be confusing if you don’t grasp this. In one sense, we all should be seeker-sensitive in terms of being sensitive to



seekers as a lifestyle. Jesus was very sensitive to seekers, and we should be too. But the fact is that the term seeker-sensitive has also become known as a methodology of ministry, in particular a certain type of worship service. This second sense is primarily what I mean when I use the term in this book. Confused? Let's look at some definitions.

Seeker-Sensitive As a Lifestyle

Being seeker-sensitive as a lifestyle means that we are sensitive to spiritual seekers in all that we do. This can apply to our conversations with those seeking; it can apply to how we design any style of worship service. In this sense, it is not a style or methodology of worship; it is a lifestyle approach to how we live as Christians in relation to being sensitive to seekers of faith.

Seeker-Sensitive As a Style

Currently in our culture, when someone refers to a seeker-sensitive worship service or approach, they many times are referring to a methodology or style of ministry—a strategy of designing ministry to attract those who feel the church is irrelevant or dull. This often involves removing what could be considered religious stumbling blocks and displays of the spiritual (such as extended worship, religious symbols, extensive prayer times, liturgy, etc.) so that seekers¹ can relate to the environment and be transformed by the message of Jesus. Generally, seeker-sensitive services function as entry points into the church, and the church offers deeper teaching and worship in another meeting or setting. This is primarily what I mean when I use the term seeker-sensitive in this book.

Sky did not come to know Jesus and become part of a church because of a well-rehearsed drama sketch, polished four-point preaching, flawless programming, or new padded theater seats. It wasn't because we met in a well-lit, contemporary, bright and cheery church facility where we removed the religious symbols, stained glass, and churchy atmosphere to make "seekers" more comfortable. It wasn't because we used secular songs in the church meeting so he could relate to them, or cut musical worship to a minimum in the fear that it would cause someone like Sky to be turned off. In fact, Sky experienced almost the opposite.



Being sensitive to seekers is not a style of worship! I could show you hundreds of different styles being used by seeker-sensitive churches, including surfer seeker-services, cowboy seeker-services, artistic seeker-services, ethnic seeker-services, liturgical seeker-services, and postmodern seeker-services. That's because not all seekers are alike.

Being sensitive to the mindset of unbelievers is a biblical attitude (1 Cor. 14:23) modeled by both Jesus and Paul. It is loving lost people enough to try to relate to them on their level (whatever that is) so Jesus can save them. In a postmodern world, building that bridge will be hard work, but this book can show you how to do it. It begins with not expecting nonbelievers to act, think, or feel like believers until they are.

—RICK WARREN



vin•tage

adj. of high quality, especially from a past period
n. the date or time period when something was produced or existed²

When he attended his new friends' worship gathering, he experienced more of a "post-seeker-sensitive" approach to ministry and worship services. This approach is really nothing new at all; in fact, it is simply going back to more of a raw and basic form of "vintage Christianity."

Post-Seeker-Sensitive

Going back to a raw form of vintage Christianity, which unapologetically focuses on kingdom living by disciples of Jesus. A post-seeker-sensitive worship gathering promotes, rather than hides, full displays of spirituality (extended worship, religious symbols, liturgy, extensive prayer times, extensive use of Scripture and readings, etc.) so that people can experience and be transformed by the message of Jesus. This approach is done, however, with renewed life and is still "sensitive" as clear instruction and regular explanation are given to help seekers understand theological terms and spiritual exercises.

In fact, I later learned from Sky that if we had offered the type of things typically associated with a "seeker-sensitive service," he wouldn't have been interested. If he was going to take the time to go to a church service, he told me, he wanted to experience an authentic spiritual event in which he could see if God was truly alive and being worshiped. If he attended the service his Christian friends went to, and discovered that we took away the crosses and anything that looked religious and didn't open the Bible and had fewer times of prayer and singing, he would have felt Christians were either embarrassed by or were trying to hide what they believed. To him, this would have been hypocritical and even a turn-off to church.



Many of the very things that we removed from our churches because they were stumbling blocks to seekers in previous generations are now the very things that are attractive to emerging generations.

How ironic! So many of the things I had once worked so hard to eliminate in order to be seeker-sensitive, to avoid offending or confusing a seeker like Sky, were exactly the things he found the most influential in his decision to become a Christian. For Sky, a seeker-sensitive (style, not



lifestyle) approach would have been a complete failure and possibly even detrimental. Sky comes from a generation that grew up in a changing post-Christian culture, a culture different from that of the generations that grew up when the seeker-sensitive movement started. We need to recognize that we are moving into a post-seeker-sensitive era.

By no means do I discount the value of seeker-sensitive-style ministry. I know for a fact that God has used it in phenomenal ways and will continue to use it. But our culture is changing. Previous generations grew up experiencing church as dull or meaningless, and so the seeker-sensitive model strove to reintroduce church as relevant, contemporary, and personal. But emerging generations are being raised without any experience of church, good or bad. As in Sky's case, when he first went to church, his desire was for a spiritual, transcendent experience. To have removed the overtly spiritual would have seemed very strange to him.

✦ **The emerging church exists in a post-seeker-sensitive world**

In the following chapters, we will learn more about what led to Sky's conversion and what he was drawn to in his Christian friends and in the worship services they attended. We will look at what people in emerging generations are finding attractive (and not so attractive) about the Christian faith and today's church. Sky's story is not isolated; all across America I am hearing similar accounts repeated over and over. I believe Sky's former opinions about Christianity are quickly becoming the norm. If you aren't yet hearing opinions like Sky shared, it is only a matter of time before you do. I believe there are many Skys in your local community, perhaps many more than you realize. But the good news is that they are spiritually open.

I believe we are at a point in church history where we need to rethink some of our assumptions and reexamine some of our presuppositions about church and ministry. As we will discuss in the next several chapters, the emerging church is emerging in a very quickly changing world. So we need to change how we go about our ministry.

✦ **A new wave of change**

In recent times, the wave of change came to the church with the seeker-sensitive movement. Another wave of change is now breaking on our shores. This shouldn't surprise us. Time passes, new generations are born, cultures change, so the church must change. We see this in ancient





I find that here on the East Coast, where most evangelical churches are oriented toward the religious right and many if not most unchurched folk are liberal Democrats, the anxiety level about visiting a church is so high that people just won't do it—unless they are really searching for God. What matters to them when they visit, I believe, is to find authentic, honest seekers (people seeking God's kingdom and justice, my preferred word for believers), along with a service that is rich, meaningful, mysterious, yet comprehensible or approachable. In other words, the road of faith needs on-ramps and clear signage. If the service is odd, strange, fake, forced, or inaccessible, those characteristics undermine the credibility of the message. One of our challenges is to make our symbols (and rituals and other religious stuff) understandable for new people so they can bond to the meaning of the symbols. In other words, we need to explore an alternative to (1) using symbols that make no sense to people and (2) getting rid of symbols; (3) using symbols and finding ways to make them enticing, attractive, and penetrable for people unfamiliar with them.

—BRIAN MCLAREN

church history, in European church history, as well as in American church history. Many call the change we are now experiencing as moving from a modern to a postmodern era. Some call it moving from a Christian to a post-Christian culture. Sky and others like him probably wouldn't call it anything at all or want to be labeled as post-anything. However, emerging generations are definitely being shaped by the culture, probably much more than they or we realize.

The type of change I am talking about is not just about what happens in the church service, with the music, or with the small group strategy. These are only surface issues. It is really a revolutionary change that affects almost everything we do—even what comes to our minds when we say the word church.

+ No matter how the culture or church ministry changes, Jesus never changes

You may be thinking, "I'd like to see emerging generations reached, but how the heck can I ever keep up with all the waves of cultural changes?" Amid our anxiety, remember that although ministry methodology, church, and culture change, Jesus never does.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). He is the same Jesus now as he was in the Upper Room and as he appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. He is the same Jesus as when Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg. He is the same Jesus as when the Enlightenment was in full force. Modern world, postmodern world, post-postmodern world . . . Jesus never changes. He is the reason for and the focus of all that we do. He is our anchor, no matter which direction the tide may be taking us.

We must not forget that cultural change doesn't surprise Jesus. I don't think Jesus is looking down, saying, "Oh no! I wasn't expecting this post-modern shift. What do we do?" We can take great comfort in the fact that we are merely experiencing a period in history, and that in the perspective of eternity, this is but a blip on the screen. However, it is a reality, and emerging church leaders must be students of world and church history so we can gain perspective on all of this.

+ A return to vintage Christianity

In today's world, emerging generations have no anchor or truth to hold onto. So as they hear and experience Jesus as the truth and the anchor for the very first time, the hope for the future is incredibly opti-



mistic. As the emerging church returns to a rawer and more vintage form of Christianity, we may see explosive growth much like the early church did. These new cultural waves of change may bring the greatest opportunity we have had in a long time to see many antichurch, anti-Christian, post-Christian seekers like Sky meet the eternal Jesus.

EMERGING THOUGHTS



1. Do you know anyone like Sky? Would you say his or her criticisms of the church and Christians are the same, or are there other criticisms you are hearing from those in emerging generations?
2. If you don't know of anyone like Sky, do you feel that people like him don't exist in your community, or that you are just not in the right circles to have met them? What might be some ways you could meet people like him in your area?
3. What would you say someone like Sky would like about your church right now if he visited? What would you think he might find that would confirm his preconceptions about Christianity?
4. Are you worried or excited about the changes in the culture? Why? If you feel more anxious than excited, how could you go about finding comfort in the fact that although culture may change, Jesus always remains the same?