

## The Seeker-Sensitive Church



## A Contemporary Concept?



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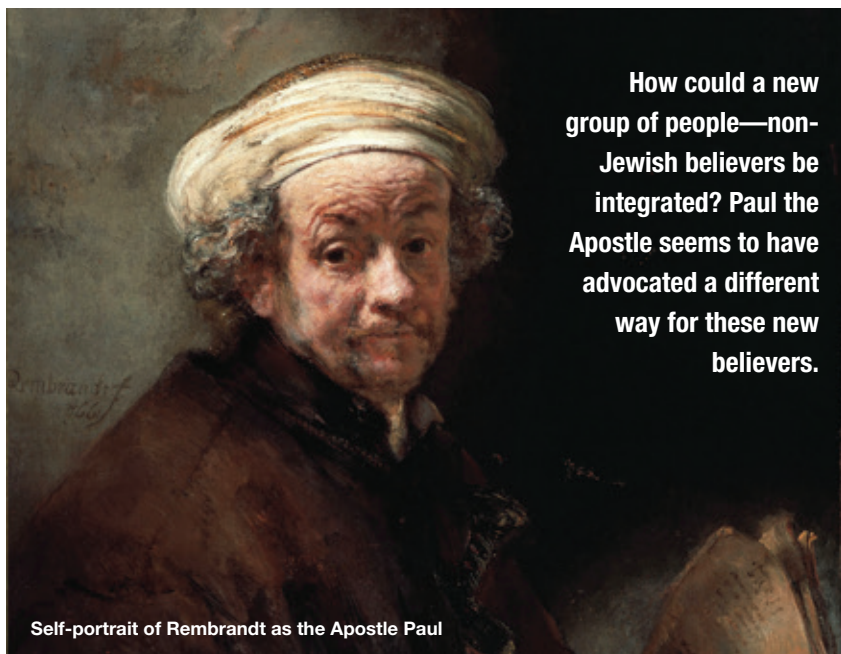
**IN RECENT YEARS** we have often heard about churches that have embraced a style that is friendlier for the uninitiated visitor. Called seeker-sensitive, the churches employing this model phased out certain worship styles or messages which could be offensive to the hearers, particularly those of the younger generations. Depending on the church, the changes could be merely cosmetic or deeper involving avoidance of church doctrines that might be offensive. Sin, judgment and holiness became off-limits subjects in many churches. Crosses were removed from the walls of some churches.

According to Dorothy Greco's article in the August 2013 issue of *Christianity Today*, "Seeker-sensitive services originally promised to woo post-moderns back into the fold. Out the stained glass window

went the somewhat formal 45-minute exegetical sermon, replaced by a shorter, story-based talk to address the ‘felt needs’ of the congregants while reinforcing the premise that following Jesus would dramatically improve their quality of life. Contemporary worship had already found its way into the mainstream, but their new model nudged the church further toward a rock-concert feel. Finally, programs proliferated, programs for nearly every demographic, from Mothers of Preschoolers to Red Glove Motorcycle Riders. None of these changes were pernicious or even poorly intentioned. In the case of my previous church, choosing the seeker model began innocently. The staff endeavored to create a wide on-ramp for folks who might ordinarily bypass the sanctuary in favor of Starbucks.”

In our times, this has often been viewed as a controversial move, which has been criticized for watering down the Gospel message. Is it just style, or does it indeed change core values of Christianity? Most of the advocates of seeker-sensitive churches seem to view this friendly style as a way to get newcomers in the door, with the implicit understanding that once inside they will soon grasp the deeper truths of Christianity. Only with time will we know the true value of this philosophy.

During the early years of the Church, many of the same issues were faced. How could the message be relevant to more people? How could a new group of people—non-Jewish believers be integrated? Paul the Apostle seems to have advocated a different way for these new believers. Shortly after the time of the Apostles, Church leaders made many decisions in order to be relevant to the increasing Gentile population (Greeks and Romans) of the Church, leaving behind many aspects of biblical worship. Let’s look at a few of the issues.



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Self-portrait of Rembrandt as the Apostle Paul





Photo by Isranet

Fourth-century synagogue mosaic

## Early Issues of the Church

The book of Acts describes the ministry of the early Church in quite some detail. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School says, “One of the major debates in the early church was not whether Jews who followed Jesus needed to keep kosher, but whether Gentiles who followed him needed to do so as well. The conclusion was that they didn’t, for the commandments given to Moses at Sinai were for the Jewish people, not for the Gentiles.”

Acts 15 talks about these issues, “*But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, [non-Jewish believers] and to command them to keep the law of Moses’*” (Acts 15:5). What they were saying is that Gentile believers needed to become Jewish. Circumcision was like a code word for conversion. Circumcision was the sign of being part of the covenant. In the Jewish world this remains true—every eight-day-old male is circumcised and thus becomes part of the covenant, and every male convert to Judaism must become circumcised. According to Paul, it wasn’t necessary for Gentiles to convert to Judaism, since God had already showed His love for them by pouring out His Spirit on them.

Jewish author, Pamela Eisenbaum argues that in order to understand the writings of Paul, one must understand that he was a Jew writing to Gentile believers. “But understanding Paul as a Jew speaking to Gentiles can make all the difference in understanding

**The tefillin contains Scripture and is bound on the forehead and arms.**



what Paul wrote and why he wrote it. Take for example 1 Corinthians 7:19. 'Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but obeying the commandments of God is everything' (NRSV)...If one bears in mind that Paul is speaking to Gentiles, and that the teachings about Jewish law preserved in the apostle's letters are teachings about how Torah is and is not applicable to Gentiles, then Paul's reasoning begins to come clear."

What does Paul mean—circumcision is nothing? For circumcision is one of the commandments of God. She goes on, "...it is indeed regarded as one of God's most important commandments for most any Jew of Paul's time. But it is understood to be as a marker of Jewish identity and incumbent on Jewish males only." Eisenbaum argues, "Paul's point is that God does not require the same things of all people at all times. Priests for example, had to obey a set of purity laws that did not apply to Israelites in general. Since only Jews are commanded to be circumcised, Gentiles are following the will of God by not being circumcised."

Another requirement for the convert to Judaism was to be immersed in the *mikvah* (Christian baptism stems from this practice). Interestingly, even though Paul says that circumcision was not necessary, he does continue with baptism (immersion in a *mikvah*). This is in accord with the words of Yeshua (Jesus). Tim Hegg in the book *The Letter Writer* comments, "Just before His death, resurrection, and ascension, Yeshua instructed His disciples regarding the ingathering of the Gentiles

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First-century mikvah

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(nations). They were to teach them what He had commanded and bring them into the community of faithful Israel via the *mikvah* (Matt. 28:19-20)."

Levine postulates that Paul didn't feel it was necessary for the new Gentile believers to become Jewish because of Jewish theology concerning the world to come (the Messianic age). According to Levine, Gentiles of the time could either convert formally, or become God-fearers without undergoing conversion, or Gentiles could just behave in a righteous manner. She says, "Paul, good Jew that he was, knew about righteous Gentiles. He also knew that the God of Israel was also the God of the Gentiles and that the Gentiles, *qua* Gentiles, would accept this theological truth in the last days. In other words, for Paul, the Gentiles would come into the Messianic realm as Gentiles; they did not have to be Jews in order to be in a right relationship



Jesus reads the *Torah* scrolls in a synagogue.



with God. The Babylonian Talmud, that compendium of Jewish Law, agrees with him: ‘Righteous people of all nations have a share in the world to come (Sanhedrin 105a).’”

In Acts 15, James responds to the discussion and ends with an interesting statement after he lists the proposed requirements for Gentile believers, “*For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath*” (Acts 15:21). Remember that at the time there were no churches; the believers worshipped in the synagogues or in their homes. The only other choice was pagan temples. The prohibitions given in Acts 15 to the early non-Jewish believers were directly in answer to the pagan worship rites (including sexual orgies) in the pagan temples in worship of false gods. It seems that James assumed that even though they didn’t convert to Judaism (circumcision), they would learn the ways of *Torah*, because they would be hearing Moses taught each week in the synagogue. Was this decision, recorded for us in the book of Acts, a first step down the road we today call seeker-sensitive?

Levine thinks it is likely that Paul’s thinking stemmed from a belief that the Messianic age was near. Paul may have reasoned that making it as easy as possible for Gentiles to accept God was good because more Gentiles would come to knowledge of the one true God of Israel. He probably didn’t visualize the fact that nearly 2,000 years would elapse and we would still be waiting for the second coming of Yeshua. He also might be shocked to see the difference between modern-day Christians and the early Church. The different life practices of Christians (as the followers of Yeshua came to be called) and Jews made it difficult for true fellowship to be possible. This is especially true concerning food. A *Torah*-observant Jewish person could not eat at the same table with those eating forbidden foods—like pork.

## Accommodations to Roman Culture

Masters International School of Divinity Professor Skip Moen teaches that in the ancient Roman world three things in the Jewish faith and practice were viewed as particularly odd (and perhaps offensive) to the Romans: circumcision (considered barbaric), prohibition on eating pork (which Romans loved) and keeping the Sabbath and holidays (which seemed lazy.) The Jerusalem Council was deemed to have eliminated all of these stumbling blocks.

It is my opinion that if the Apostles had been able to see the direction the largely Gentile church would take, they would have been shocked. How could it be otherwise? These Jewish men who followed a Jewish Messiah, kept the biblical feasts, kept the Sabbath (*Shabbat*) and honored the *Tenakh* (Gen.–Mal.) would have undoubtedly been ill at ease in a Church that did away with or radically altered all the faith practices of biblical Judaism. I am sure that they never envisioned the day when followers of Yeshua would no longer celebrate His feasts or the Sabbath. Could they have imagined a day when Gentile believers would claim that they were the new Israel and that God was finished with the Jewish people? I think not.



Roman statue of the god Mars

Still we must appreciate the fact that God was leading the Apostles with a strategy to reach the world. *“After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things”* (Acts 15:16–17—quoted from Amos 9:11–12). God’s plan was good. But, in my opinion, in the generations to come, men went farther than God had planned.

## The Next Generations

It seems that the seeker-sensitive strategy of Paul and the Apostles bore much fruit. The numbers of believers grew. Bruce Shelley says, “First and rather obviously, early Christians were moved by a burning conviction. The Event had happened. God had invaded time, and Christians were captivated by the creative power of that grand news. They knew that men had been redeemed and they could

not keep to themselves the tidings of salvation. That unshakeable assurance, in the face of every obstacle including martyrdom itself, helps explain the growth of the church.”

As the Church grew, the majority of the members were Gentiles. The Jewish character of the early Church was changing. As is natural, the culture of the day began to be inculcated into the church. Let’s consider a few ways this happened.

## Keeping the Sabbath

One of the Ten Commandments is to keep the Sabbath. But, Sabbath is a pre-Mosaic Law reality. In the Creation story God rested on the Sabbath, the seventh day. For thousands of years Jews have been keeping this day holy unto the Lord. Many biblical passages mention the fact that Yeshua was in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In the beginning the early church also worshipped on the Sabbath in the synagogues (as well as in homes). After some time, Sunday, the day of Yeshua’s resurrection, came to be the day of worship.



Marvin Wilson commented, “But both Jew and Christian recognized that Sunday was also a Roman holy day tied to sun-worship. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, indicates that this change had begun to take place as early as about AD 115. He wrote to the Magnesians, telling them to ‘no longer live for the Sabbath but for the Lord’s Day, on which day our life arose.’ The *Didache*, a manual of Church instructions written around AD 120, also directs Christians to come together on the Lord’s day to worship.” How convenient it was for citizens of Rome that Yeshua was resurrected on the first day of the week (Sunday), which was already a pagan holy day dedicated to sun-worship. It enabled them to worship as Christians in a pagan society without drawing undue attention to themselves.

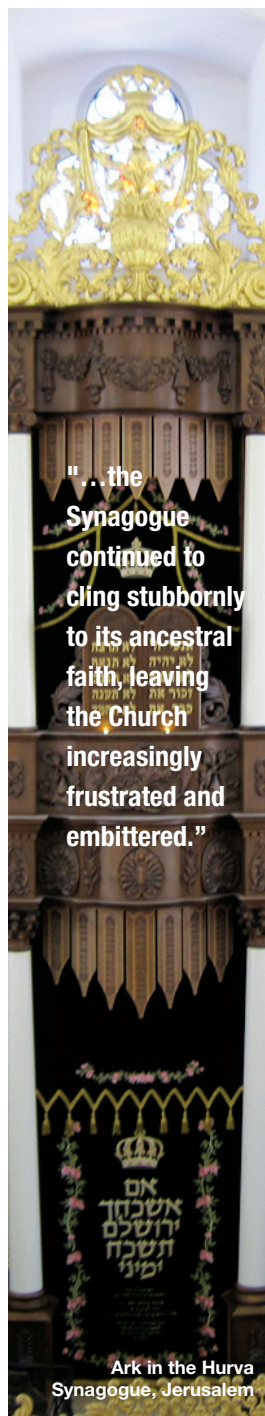
But, how was this received by the Jewish community? Marvin Wilson explains, “Over the centuries the Jewish community has interpreted the Church’s decision to worship on Sunday as a rejection of the very heart of the Jewish experience—rejection of the Law. This move to Sunday worship made it exceedingly difficult, if not virtually impossible, for the Jew to give any serious consideration to the Christian message, or even to enter into Christian-Jewish dialogue without suspicion.” I have no problem with Sunday worship. In fact I believe that we should worship every day of the week. However, since living in Israel and experiencing Sabbath worship, with virtually the whole society ceasing from work, I am entranced with the idea that God gave the Sabbath as a gift to man. It was a revolutionary concept in the ancient world and fully in line with God’s merciful character that He would ordain a day of rest every week. When I travel I miss *Shabbat* more than anything else.

## Biblical Feasts

In the Writings of the Apostles (Newer Testament) Yeshua, Paul and others make mention of the Feasts. It is apparent that the Feasts of the LORD were celebrated. As time went on, Christians ceased this practice. Christian events that happened on Feasts, for instance the passion week of the Lord, were renamed and adjusted on the calendar. Instead of celebrating the Lord’s resurrection on Passover as it occurred, by the year AD 154 Christians were celebrating Easter. Today few Christians are aware that the name Easter is derived from the name of Eastre, a Teutonic spring goddess, to whom sacrifices were offered in April. Easter egg hunts are also connected with the worship of Eastre (also known as Astarte) but few Christians are aware that common cultural practices are actually based on pagan, idol worship practices. To the Jewish people whose



[www.wikipedia.org/](http://www.wikipedia.org/) Katrina Wiese



"...the Synagogue continued to cling stubbornly to its ancestral faith, leaving the Church increasingly frustrated and embittered."

Ark in the Hurva Synagogue, Jerusalem

Photo by Krista Keeling

most famous prayer is the *Shema*, "Hear O Israel: the LORD your God is one God" (from Deut. 6:4), and to whom idol worship was forbidden, this was scandalous. This renaming may be an indication of a further adjustment to the Roman culture, and perhaps a further evidence of seeker-sensitive philosophy at work in the first centuries of the Church. My family refers to the day as Resurrection Day, and places our focus on the biblical accounts of Yeshua's victory over death.

## Consequences

The actions described in this teaching letter thus far may be described as de-Judaizing the faith rather than an anti-Judaism effort. Sadly, that was not the case going forward. Marvin Wilson says, "By the middle of the second century the writings of the Church Fathers reveal considerable antagonism between Gentile Christians and Jews...The posture of the Church was decisively set against the Synagogue. Whereas one gentile nation after another had responded positively to the Christian missionary outreach, the Synagogue continued to cling stubbornly to its ancestral faith, leaving the Church increasingly frustrated and embittered." The centuries that followed increased the gaps between daughter Christianity and mother Judaism, until one bore little resemblance to the other in spite of a shared book (*Tenakh*) and a shared faith in the God of Israel.

Today many believers are rediscovering the Hebraic roots of their faith. They are questioning some of the decisions of the Church fathers. They also seek to find ways to dialogue and learn from their Jewish brothers.

## Seeker-Sensitive??

It seems that many early Church decisions were made in a seeker-sensitive mentality. Was it wrong? No, not in the beginning! In fact the Apostolic Writings make it clear that God was leading the outreach to the Gentile world. Today millions of Gentile believers are thankful that the Apostles followed the leading of the Lord to bring faith in Israel's God and Messiah to the world. Were there excesses and ungodly attitudes which developed?

I believe so. Much of the pain and anguish that the Jewish people experienced could have been avoided. Much of the chasm that developed between Christians and Jews could have been greatly diminished.

Yeshua said of the *Tenakh*, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever

therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:17–20). Yeshua was speaking in a Jewish environment to Jews. I do not believe that Yeshua and Paul were in contradiction. Paul was writing primarily to Gentile believers. Maybe it is our understanding (or lack of understanding) of the culture of the day that has caused the Church to misunderstand some of the writings of Paul.

Pamela Eisenbaum, in her book, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, states, “Simply put, Christians have been misreading Paul for centuries. Worse yet, this misreading of Paul was inexorably linked to the degraded conception of Judaism that had so often led to the worst manifestations of Christian anti-Judaism...Most important for modern readers to note is that Paul wrote to specific communities of believers, people with whom he usually had an intimate relationship. Even within his own time, the audience Paul addressed was not the church universal, but specific churches.” We must remember that we only have half of the conversation. Paul’s letters are called “Rabbinic Responsa Literature.” He was responding to questions and issues faced by the new congregations he had birthed. We don’t have the questions; we only have his answers.



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## Where Do We Go from Here?

In our attempts to bring the Good News to all cultures, we must be careful not to make it so easy (seeker-sensitive) that we change the meaning of the Word of God. Being a follower of Yeshua is not always easy. Many have been and are being martyred for their faith, although in the West we have not experienced this horror. We should only allow seeker-sensitive philosophy if it does not water down biblical truth or morph us into something that God never intended His people to be.

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In humility and love we should embrace our roots, without denying our Christian beliefs. We should prayerfully discern between customs (even if they are hundreds or thousands of years old) and biblical truth. We should rediscover the world of the Bible as we seek to understand the truths of the kingdom that were birthed in the land of Israel through the Jewish people as they were moved upon by the Holy Spirit. We should seek to have sincere relationships with our Jewish brethren.

By Rebecca J. Brimmer  
International President and CEO

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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