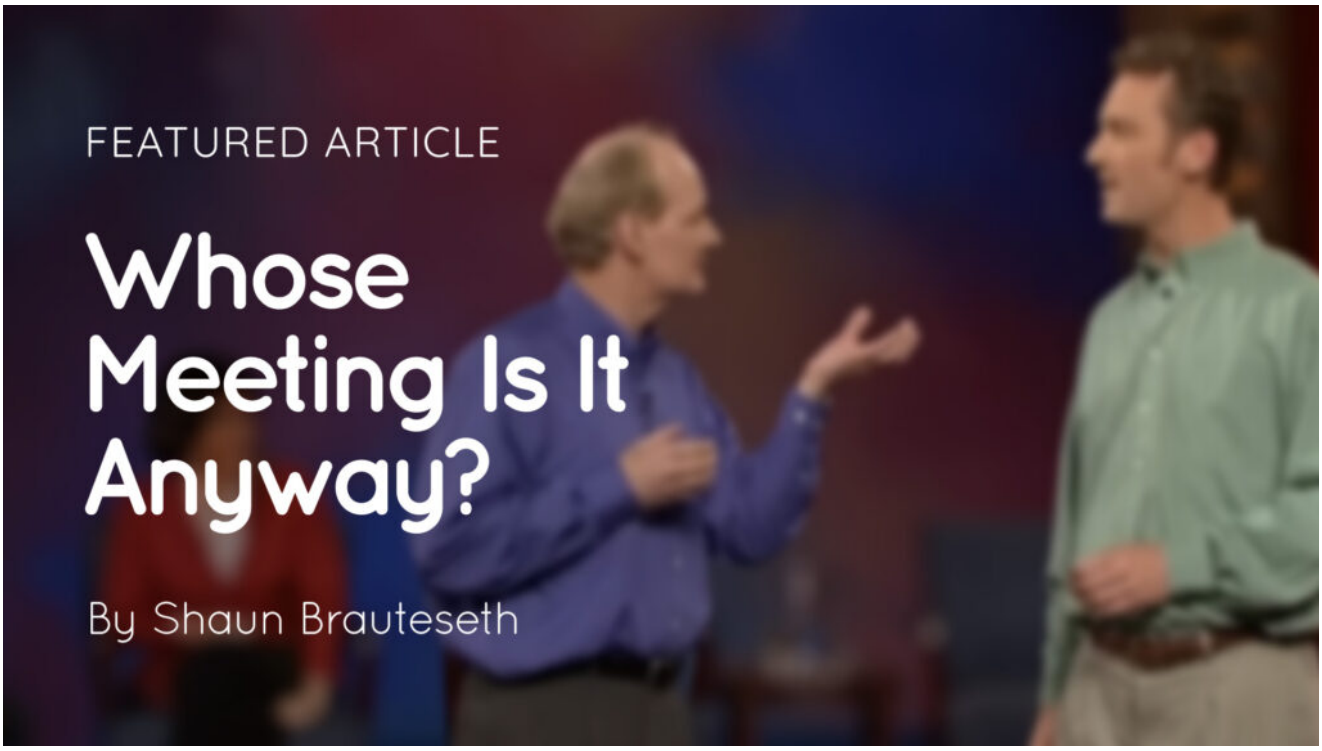
Whose Meeting Is It Anyway?

Shaun Brauteseth 11 December 2015



It began with something I posted on Facebook – a quote by that great Welsh physician-turned-preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Here's what he said almost half a century ago:

'The world today is laughing at the church, laughing at her attempts to be nice and make people feel at home. My friend, if you feel at home in any church without believing in Christ as your personal saviour, then that church is no church at all, but a place of entertainment or a social club. For the truth of Christianity and the preaching of the gospel should make a church intolerable and uncomfortable to all except those who believe, and even they should go away feeling chastened and humble.' **[1]**

> This 'outsiders first' approach to church meetings is found nowhere in Scripture.

Sobering stuff. After posting the quote, I received a response from someone in another part of the country. This guy, a casual acquaintance who is part of a church in another city, was kind but clear in his criticism: 'Didn't Jesus make the least religious people of His day feel the most welcome? Didn't the prostitutes and tax collectors feel the most comfortable around Him?' It's amazing how one questioning voice can make you feel unsure about your stance, and I

immediately wondered whether the statement had been too extreme. A short while later, I suddenly realised the answer.

It's true. People really did seem to feel comfortable around Jesus. He was smart enough to engage with the top religious minds at the age of twelve, and yet so humble and warm that the most vulnerable, hardened and shameful members of society – children, criminals and prostitutes – openly came to Him. What a man! What a heart. And yet that quote from Martyn Lloyd-Jones is not about the heart a Christian carries inside of him. It's about a church meeting. The people Jesus interacted with on the streets and in homes might not have felt too comfortable in the synagogue during the times of worship and teaching, but that doesn't mean the synagogue leaders were doing something wrong. God's people were gathering to study His word, receive instruction and worship Him. The very nature of what they were doing meant some might feel uncomfortable.

Church Meetings are to Honour God

When the church gathers, its first priority is to honour God. He is the most important One at the meeting, and pleasing Him must be first. Then the church body needs to be built up, so that it can grow into maturity and grow up into Christ. The saints need to be equipped and taught. There will be visitors at those meetings who should be warmly received and welcomed, but the church is not gathering for their sake. That would be an outreach meeting or an evangelistic crusade.

Today, it feels as if much of the Western church has largely put outsiders at the top of the priority list in their meetings. It's as if the goal of many church meetings is to cater to the un-churched, and the result is meeting after meeting of shallow, lowest-common-denominator motivational speaking. I have heard the pastor of a large church explain to his congregation that he knows his teaching lacks spiritual depth and detail, and that he purposefully keeps the church swimming in the shallow end of the pool, but that the church members are paying a noble price to ensure that non-Christians are able to come in and immediately feel at home. I believe he sincerely desires to see people reached for Jesus, but I also believe that he shouldn't be leading a church. He is unwilling and unable to use the church's gathering times to bring believers in maturity, and as a result, discipleship is almost non-existent in the church.

This 'outsiders first' approach to church meetings is found nowhere in Scripture.

> But God's desires must be placed above man's.

It aims for maximum reach with minimal commitment, and the fruit of it is shown in people who are believers but not disciples. For a biblical perspective on an unbeliever entering a church meeting, here's Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25: 'But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!" Today, much of the Western church is far too interested in the comfort of visitors to let it even get to that point.

As we continue to fight for what it means to be part of authentic, New Testament churches, we must guard the purpose and priority of our meetings. Visitors should be welcomed, honoured, orientated and be made to feel valuable. But God's desires must be placed above man's. The goal of our Sunday meetings is not primarily to reach the un-churched, but firstly to get into God's presence together and to equip the saints. May many salvations and Damascus-road encounters happen during our meetings, but may they be the result of us putting first things first.

[1] Murray, Iain. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years, 1899-1939. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982.