

Study Guide



FOREWORD BY J.D. GREAR

PEOPLE ARE THE MISSION

*How Churches Can Welcome **GUESTS***

*Without Compromising the **GOSPEL***

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**People Are The Mission:
How Churches Can Welcome Guests Without Compromising the Gospel
Study Guide**

Reading a book is more fun when it's a community project. You're encouraged to grab a few friends - maybe fellow staff members, other volunteers, or even leaders in other churches - and work through these discussion points as you seek to make your church more hospitable for your guests!

Introduction: A Wee Little Man and a Tale of Two Churches

One minute before a guest steps onto your church property, they are a part of the community. And if you do a poor job of welcoming them, if they feel ignored or unloved, if you don't proceed with due diligence in following up with them and building a relationship with them, they will go right back to being a part of the community. No second chances. No do-overs. You have one opportunity to bring them into the fold, and unless you steward that opportunity well, they may not ever come back.

- In your experience, when it comes to a guest feeling welcome, does it depend more on the preparation of the church or the expectation of the guest?
- Here's your opportunity to share some war stories. Think back to a time when your church didn't steward a guest experience well. What happened? How did you discover the issue? How did you resolve it?
- Now think about what you *want* your guests' experience to look like, in an ideal world. When people walk away from your church, what do you want them to feel, think or say?

...before you get upset over my characterizations - or allow yourself to be painted into one particular corner - recognize that a little bit of both First United and Tribe exists in all of us. Rarely can we find a church that falls completely in one camp or another. To assume that seeker-driven churches have no theologians or tradition-centered churches have no warmth is wildly erroneous. Both sides have strengths and weaknesses. And all of us have our go-to characteristics of the other guys that we like to villainize, when in reality we can carry those elements into our own ministries. We all have blind spots in the way we approach ministry, and we can all acknowledge shortfalls in the model that we choose.

- List three strengths and three weakness of both the First United and Tribe models.
- It's time for some fun: go around the circle and explain which church ("First United" or "Tribe") you think your church is *most* like. Which of those characteristics are endearing? Which of them could potentially be a turn-off to your community?
- Discuss *how* your church arrived at this particular model of ministry. Was there ever a time where your church looked different than it does now?
- Now look at your community. Based on what you know about demographics, culture, acceptance of organized religion, etc., does the model you offer match the model that people would look for in a church? If not, what changes could you make so your church is more appealing to your community?

Chapter 1: The Gospel Is Offensive. Nothing Else Should Be.

There are things that you do that offend, bother, or irritate [the guests at your church], and you can't simply write off their offenses, their prejudices, and their preconceived ideas. And make no mistake: guests can and will object over everything from intolerance to inattention, from doctrinal stances to denominational practices. They can get offended over phrases you use, rudeness they perceive, or a spirit of narrow-mindedness they sense in the way you speak and act. Regardless of whether you think their objections are justified, they are still their objections. They are real issues for real people, and you really have to acknowledge and understand them if you hope to project a welcoming environment for your guests and greet them with the hospitality of the gospel.

- Grab a whiteboard or a sheet of butcher paper and identify a scribe. As a group, brainstorm common offenses that a guest might experience at a typical church. These could be anything from “no one spoke to me” to “the music was too loud.”
- Now, identify which of these could be true of *your* church. Give examples of where you've seen these things offend or turn away a guest.
- Finally, categorize these offenses into three sections: can be fixed this by this weekend, can be fixed in the next three months, can be fixed in the next six months. List practical ways you can address each issue.

We don't have to choose between dumbing down the gospel and being self-righteous, sanctimonious jerks. Pastors should continue to preach the unfiltered gospel, running the risk of offending people with their sin and shocking them with the unending love of Jesus. But we should also set the table in such a way that nothing apart from the gospel offends them. You see, the order of the gospel is important when it comes to guest services. We lead with grace and love, because it was grace and love that changed our own hearts. We don't ask our guests to clean themselves up before we're willing to love them; we just love them. Seek to create the kind of environment where your guests will say, “I don't necessarily agree with what I heard, but I'll never forget how graciously I was treated.” That hospitality-soaked environment can eventually turn cold hearts warm and lead people to Christ.

- Do you agree or disagree that an offensive gospel can be shared in the context of a welcoming, accepting church? Why or why not?
- Think back to the last five sermons preached at your church. What statements could have made guests think “I don't necessarily agree with what I heard”?
- Within those same five weeks, can you think of stories about guests feeling welcomed, cared for, loved, and cherished? If not, discuss where the breakdown may have happened, and how the “double-whammy” of hard sermon + hard environment might affect them.

Chapter 2: The Sermon Starts in the Parking Lot

I hope we can agree that the message of your church must be different than the message of Disney World. Your goal each day must be to lead people to Jesus, not to market your church. So if your message is eternally different, that should be all that matters, right? If the Holy Spirit is the one who changes hearts, then everything else is simply irrelevant. You don't need a parking team. You don't need a check-in process for kids. You don't need a plan for next steps. You simply need the Holy Spirit.

- Read John 16:8, 13. When Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would “guide you into all the truth,” was he discounting ministry methods? What methods do you think might have arisen in the early church due to necessity?
- How can we monitor our methods to make sure they don't run amok? In other words, how will we know whether we are depending on *Spirit only* or *environment only*? (See page 61 for more on this distinction.)
- Think about a time when you've seen Paul's “all things to all people” statement (1 Corinthians 9:22) taken out of context to justify irresponsible methods. What happened?

Start where your guests do, and think outside-in. Grade the quality of the message they hear before the message. Ask probing questions about your environment. Pretend you've never been to your church before, and think about what a typical guest experiences when they visit your church on a typical weekend. Your answers should point to one overarching question: Does this detail add to or take away from what we are talking about when we talk about the gospel?

- If you were visiting your church for the first time, what would attract you? What would confuse you? What would repel you? (For help, start with the header at the bottom of page 67 and work through the ten categories of “sidewalk messages” your guests will experience.)
- Categorize the “confuse / repel” issues into three sections: can be fixed this by this weekend, can be fixed in the next three months, can be fixed in the next six months.
- Develop a plan for how you can begin to align your sidewalk and stage messages. Who is the decision maker? Can it be fixed by a volunteer? Does it need approval from a committee or a different ministry leader?

Chapter 3: When Hospitality Meets Hostility

Gospel-centered hostility simply does not exist. It cannot. Jesus does not ask us to redeem our anger, to sanitize it, or to gospelize it and make it more palatable to a watching world. No, Jesus crucifies our hostility. He nailed it to the cross with her sister sins of lust, pride, greed, and gluttony. There is no redemption for hostility, there is only death. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:24)

- Think back to your life before you became a Christ follower. How did it impact your view of the local church or “church people”?
- Now think about your surrounding community. Think about the typical person that your church members work beside, live beside, or are friends with. What are their varying levels of hostility towards faith, organized religion, or your church?
- Can you point to a particular story of someone who moved from hostile towards your church to being impacted by the hospitality of your church within the last 12 months?

So we have to remember that just because someone is hostile toward the gospel doesn't mean we have to be hostile toward them. We can be an into the world kind of people: finding common points of connection and seeking opportunities to point our lost friends to faith. That's a challenge for many of us because we're so accustomed to the Christian bubble that we've forgotten what it looks like to know people who don't know Jesus.

- Think about your current circle of friends. What percentage of those friends are committed Christ followers? What percentage don't have a relationship with Jesus or the church?
- What are some practical ways you have tried to befriend people who may not agree with your faith? Do you see this as a “project,” or as an opportunity to naturally love people because of how much Christ has loved you?
- If you find that your life is marked by the “Christian bubble,” brainstorm ways to break out of that bubble. Ask your discussion group to pray for you and hold you accountable in pursuing authentic relationships with non-believers. How can you help those you lead do the same?

Chapter 4: Beyond Parking Shuttles and Smoke Machines

Our desire to welcome people and help outsiders become insiders is good. But if our desire stops there, it can be dangerous. We have to be careful that in our aspiration to provide an excellent experience for guests, the bells and whistles in our bag of tricks aren't just smoke and mirrors. We need a solid foundation that underlies and motivates all we do. If we construct a great experience on top of a shaky foundation, it's eventually going to come crashing down. And so the way we serve and care for our guests has to point to something beyond the way we serve and care for our guests.

- What is the primary *feeling* you want your guests to experience? What is the primary *truth* you want that experience to convey?
- Do you think your church's guest services "system" is over-programmed? Under-utilized? Is it built on a gospel foundation? Does it point people beyond the initial experience and towards a deeper walk with Christ?
- What parts of your guest experience don't seem to have a purpose, or that don't lead anywhere? Are there needless hoops you ask people to jump through, or repetitive information you ask for? Which of these could you get rid of today?

...it's important to push the vision for serving guests at every opportunity. That's why you have to remind your volunteers and your congregation that they are more than car parkers or bulletin distributors. Each one of them is there to help people see Jesus more clearly. You should never assume that everyone on your team is on board with the vision...The vision is not about making myself or our church look better; it's not to outdo the other congregation down the street; it's to make much of Jesus.

- Do you have a clearly-stated vision for your guest services ministry? Write it on a whiteboard or a piece of butcher paper. If you *don't* have a clear vision, have each person in the group complete this as a personal exercise: what do *they* think the vision is? Compare vision statements.
- Does your vision match reality, or what you *want* your church's reality to be? If not, why not?
- Now, starting with a fresh sheet of paper or a clean whiteboard, start drafting out a new or updated vision statement that reflects your desire to ultimately move guests into a more committed relationship with Jesus.

Chapter 5: When the Older Brother Rears His Head

We have a problem when our regular attenders are professional consumers. We call them Christ followers, and they show an understanding of salvation, but they have failed to embrace it personally in a way that has humbled them. They know they are sinners in need of God's grace, but that grace rarely flows through them to others. God's grace is a river that keeps flowing beyond us, a light that must be reflected for others to see. If we are not pouring it out into the lives of others, it grows stale and does not bear fruit. That's the condition of the older brother in the church. God's grace is for them but certainly not for those beyond them.

- Think for a moment about your "older brotherhood." Are there people or situations in your community that you believe are beyond the grace of God? How does that affect the way you act towards them or interact with them?
- Is your church known for being an oasis of grace? In other words, if someone in your community was in a crisis or needed help, would your church be the first or last place they reach out to?
- What are specific steps we can take to ensure that we don't forget how much grace we've been shown, and that we are in turn showing that grace to others?

...the same grace we show to the younger brother is needed by the older. That's why if we make it to step four (constant, gentle pressure over time) and the self-righteous still don't get it, we start over at step one (point them to grace). That's what a loving father does. What a loving father does not do is call off the mission just because someone doesn't embrace it. The father didn't give up on his oldest son, but he also didn't cancel the party either. The music still played, the neighbors still ate and drank, and the returning rebel still soaked up the royal welcome. Regardless of whether the older brother came into the house, the party still went on. Just because everyone was invited to celebrate didn't mean they were forced to do so.

- It's time to get real and raw for a moment: do you have "older brothers" in your church? (Of course you do.) How has their attitude affected the evangelistic effectiveness of your church?
- Where does your own heart land regarding the older brothers in your congregation? Do you view them as impediments to the mission? Do you secretly wish you could "kick them to the curb"? Confess that and ask for God to give you a heart of grace towards your fellow older brothers.
- Now, think about "constant, gentle pressure over time." What steps can you take in your church to help older brothers see the importance of welcoming guests? What are some non-threatening things you can implement in order to begin the redemption process of the older brother?

Chapter 6: It's Not About You

Church people experience church growth in different ways. The first way they experience it is as an outsider. If the church has been set up and designed with outsiders in mind, church growth feels great to them. The “new” is for them. The “wow” is to meet their desires. The entire experience serves as a gravitational force, pulling them into the church’s orbit. But if growth is geared toward outsiders, some insiders will experience it as a loss or a threat. Eventually your outsiders will become insiders. While they’ve both seen and benefited from the attention they once received, there comes a time when their status may feel threatened by new outsiders coming in.

- Put on your “outsider” hat for a moment. Do you think that your church has been set up for people like you? Are there clear steps in place to draw you in and cause you to want to stay?
- Now switch to your “insider” hat. When you *did* get connected to your church, did the subsequent outsiders who followed you feel like a threat? Did you feel a sense of loss or regret that you were no longer the center of attention?
- Now, combine those two perspectives. How can you design an environment where both outsiders and insiders feel safe, welcome, and honored? What are the weak spots in your current system? How can you help insiders who feel threatened become a part of the mission?

Entitlement kills a church. It will bring spiritual death to believers as well. It will kill us when we think we’ve arrived and the church exists to serve us and cater to our every whim, and we don’t ever think about serving others. Jesus knew that he needed to push back against the entitlement mentality. If there’s anybody in the history of the world who deserved to be served, it’s Jesus. But he modeled a radically countercultural way of living and leading. He washed dirty feet. He lived to meet the needs of others. He made it clear that he didn’t come to be served but to serve others (Mark 10:45).

- What percentage of your congregation is, regularly serving in some way (either inside or outside of the church)? Is serving others something that is talked about, championed, and modeled on a regular basis? If not, why not?
- Think about an area of life where you don’t feel a “call” to serve (being the assistant coach of your kid’s baseball team, participating on the board of your homeowners association, etc.). What would it take to shake you out of your lethargy and make you want to give back? What are the hurdles you would have to overcome in order to hear and follow that call?
- Now, apply your own hesitations as you think about the people in your church who aren’t currently serving. What are specific ways you can highlight opportunities to serve? How can you help people discover their gifting to serve? What kind of training or coaching can you offer them?