

Target and the Mega-Churches
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Well it's Christmas time again and controversy surrounds us. It seems to me that there have been two interesting, and related issues recently: Target's "Happy Holidays" policy and the Mega-churches that are choosing not to have services on Christmas Day (a Sunday this year). I say they are related because what they really come down to is who should decide how a large organization should behave. With any large organization, there are many "stakeholders" (the new buzz word for individuals who have an interest of some kind in the organization).

Target's policy of having employees greet patrons with "Happy Holidays" instead of Merry Christmas is an interesting question. It has two distinct elements: (1) should an organization be allowed to dictate the behavior of its personnel when they are representing the organization and (2) should Target have chosen this policy? The answer to the first question is actually quite simple: of course. When target employees put on the little red coats and the badges, they represent the corporation. It is neither unreasonable nor undesirable for the corporation to have some say in how it is represented. We wouldn't want to allow employees to swear or curse or otherwise offend customers, since it's bad for business. (which, obviously, is bad for the employees of that business as well). This is no different.

Note that the statement only applies to cases where the individual is clearly representing the organization. When Mary goes home, she can say Merry Christmas all she wants. Indeed, if Jack disagrees with the policy, he can publicly state so – but only after his shift is over. Indeed, if Pat thinks the policy is detrimental to the organization, Pat is obligated to speak up, but through proper channels.

What about the public outcry? Was that misplaced? I personally don't care if they say "Merry Christmas," "Happy Holidays," or "Go jump in the lake." It's interesting though that in the course of trying to offend no one, they seem to have offended a great many people. That's bad for business. They were wrong to institute that policy. Not because saying "Happy Holidays" is wrong or saying "Merry Christmas" is right, but because they didn't do their homework. Their constituency didn't like that. The most important stakeholder – the customer – wasn't happy. I'm sure there are some people who are offended by Merry Christmas. But let's be realistic: how many of them do a lot of shopping in late November and December? What's important here is that the decision Target should make (and ultimately did make) should be the one that is the best for that organization.

So how do we define best? In the case of a corporation like Target, it's actually quite easy: profits. In competitive markets, society as a whole is made better off when corporations take action to maximize profits (and note, it's not the job of the corporation to ensure the competitive market, that's what governments are for). Here is the link then to the Mega-Church issue: How do we define "best" for these type of organizations.

We should apply the same logic to this question as well. The organization should take the action that is best for that organization. The real problem is that “best” for a church is hardly easy.

The question here, really, is who are the stake holders in these churches? Do Christians from other communities have a stake in what Southland Christian here in Lexington does with its services? And, do they have a better idea of what is best for Southland Christian that its clergy and membership?

I’m going to say that no, they don’t. They don’t really have a stake, nor do they know better what is best. A few theological points: biblical definitions of the Sabbath run from Sundown to sundown (actually sundown Friday to sundown Saturday). It is hardly uncommon for churches to do Saturday evening services. Similarly, theologically, it is my understanding that with Christmas “the eve is as the day.” They are one holiday, again running from Sundown to Sundown. Biblically, too, we find little evidence that formal worship is required on Sunday. So I’m pretty skeptical that the nay sayers are really worried about the immortal souls of the congregation. That doesn’t seem to be their argument anyway, and so this can’t possibly be the real issue about what is best.

It seems that the nay-sayers are worried about the “message” that it sends. That somehow, Christmas is not about religion but about opening presents. That somehow this impacts Christians everywhere negatively. Another interpretation of the message it sends, though, is that Christmas is about spending time with the ones you love. That Christmas is really about the love of God for us and our love for each other.

We do express that love through presents sometimes. Yes, it’s a little crass at times, but how many of you have searched and searched for that “perfect gift” for someone? Isn’t that a valid expression of love? One hopes, of course, that it’s not the only expression, but it is valid.

I’m afraid I really don’t see the negative impact this has on the Christian community. Most importantly, I think that churches and congregations should be free to choose how, where and even when they relate to God. I personally don’t like the Mega-churches. I can’t imagine why anyone would go there. But, for some people this seems to be the way they best relate to God. It doesn’t work for me, but like any other relationship, no two are going to be the same.

I assume that the churches choosing to have their Christmas services all on the eve (and keep in mind Southland Christian is having four services Christmas eve), are choosing what’s best for their stakeholders. Ultimately that’s the best thing that any organization can do. The organizations should be free to do that and we should be especially careful of criticizing them for so doing when we ourselves are not really stakeholders.

For those of you who are in the Lexington area and looking for a Christmas Day Service, I respectfully suggest you to go to St. Raphael's Church, 1891 Parker's Mill Road, phone 255-4987.

Merry Christmas to you and your family and don't expect to see me at church on Christmas Day.