

My Two Cents on Joe Zichterman's Departure

By Pastor Chris Anderson

I listened to Joe Zichterman's "Why I Joined Willow Creek" lecture last evening, and I was extremely disappointed. Joe was a friend of mine at BJU, and I've been disappointed with his decision to dive into charismatic emergent easy-believism. Still, I figured that this lecture would at least give a well-reasoned explanation for his doctrinal changes. Not so. I was as disappointed with the lecture and reasoning as with the decision to join Willow Creek.

The blogosphere runs the risk of inviting over-analysis of decisions and events which are personal in nature. That said, since Joe has broadcast the reason for his change of heart in a public forum, and especially since he is appealing to those in fundamental settings to join him in his decision, I think his lecture deserves to be considered and answered. With that in mind, I offer the following observations of Joe's lecture.

1. I was amazed at the lack of theological and biblical reasoning for his change.

Joe barely cites Scripture during the lecture. The few times he does, his interpretations are horrific (as in his closing quotation of Gamaliel, his opening the door to ongoing theological discoveries, his sweeping gender role texts under the "historical context" rug, and his astounding claim—or threat—that suing a Christian institution for damages to one's reputation and career is a viable option, 1 Corinthians 6 notwithstanding). Rather than bringing Scripture to bear on the issue, Joe perpetually leans on his own experience and insights regarding marriage, egalitarianism, how spiritual gifts complement each other, how people have different "pathways of intimacy with God" (intellectual study, worship music, high-powered leadership, or evangelism), the phases of recovery from spiritual abuse, etc. That's not to say that Joe doesn't cite authority outside of himself, just that he doesn't cite *biblical* authority. While the Bible remains closed, we do get a wide variety of authoritative references:

- Joe quotes church growth, leadership and marriage specialists such as Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, Bruce Bugbee, John Ortberg, Stephen Arterburn, George Barna, and Peter Wagner repeatedly, as though their opinions are sufficient evidence of a point's validity.
- Joe references Watchman Fellowship (a ministry for those who have been spiritually abused by cults and the like) repeatedly.
- Joe references movies (especially "The Village" and "Population 436") repeatedly.
- Joe even works in references to Christian fiction author Beverly Lewis.

Listen to the lecture again and see if this point doesn't hit you in the face: Joe has been moved not by Scripture or theology, but by best-selling books and emotional movies. The statement "Bill Hybels says" is made often. While Joe quotes leaders and movies, Scripture is conspicuously absent. That's just sad. In fact, it's embarrassing.

Speaking of the lack of theological and biblical reasoning, I don't think the leap Joe made is as huge as it may seem. Moving from fundamentalist easy-believism to left-wing evangelical easy-believism really isn't shocking. I'm not sure Joe's theology had to change a bit. Indeed, he may just be taking a man-centered soteriology to its logical end. The point is, Hyles and Hybels are separated by only 72 miles, 1 letter and even fewer doctrinal distinctives. Their philosophy of ministry is quite similar. In a sense, Joe's just being consistent with his soteriology.

2. I was amazed at the vitriol with which he spoke.

The burr in Joe's saddle isn't hard to discern. Somehow, the second half of a lecture portending to be an explanation for his joining Willow Creek turned into a "beat the fundamentalist piñata" party. (I'm still trying to figure out how a discussion of non-accredited institutions fits under the topic "Why I Joined Willow Creek.") I felt embarrassed, not so much for fundamentalism as for Joe. Honestly, I blushed for him during the second half of the lecture, which was big on rhetoric and innuendo and small on substance. He deals with

fundamentalism under the dubious heading of “cults, sects and high control groups.” He makes over-the-top comparisons of fundamentalists to Amish groups, Mormon polygamists who sexually abuse children(!), Jehovah’s Witnesses, rabid dogs, and others. The fact that Joe’s fundamentalist roots are even compared to these groups suggests that he has an axe to grind.

What was especially painful to hear was Joe’s obvious lack of objectivity and self-awareness: what he accuses “high control groups” (read, *fundamentalists*) of are the very things he does in the presentation—failure to confront biblically and privately, character assassination or discrediting, impugning of motives, pious smearing in which an unnamed but obvious villain is criticized, spinning so that you look like you’re taking the high road, etc. He throws out accusations of “boys’ clubs” and “schoolyard bullies” and “intimidation” and “lying.” He suggests that some fear that if they leave a high control group they’ll “go to hell”(!). Joe’s pseudo-humble disclaimers (“I don’t mean to hurt anybody” or “I don’t have any particular group in mind”) don’t veil a tragically bitter rant.

Remember, this was no off-the-cuff conversation. Joe wasn’t sharing his opinion over a casual lunch with a personal friend. This was a well-thought-out, carefully articulated lecture at an institution known for its academic credibility. It was unworthy of a man with the training of Joe Zichterman. It was unworthy of an institution with the reputation of TEDS.

3. I was amazed at the pervasive language of victimization.

The language of “spiritual abuse” and “victimization” permeates the presentation. Whatever else Joe says, the idea of religious oppression is never far from his mind. These aren’t laughing matters, obviously, but the second half of the lecture sounded more like Dr. Phil than a lecture explaining a theological flip-flop.

Frustratingly, the language of victimization isn’t limited to Joe. Several bloggers have spoken in sympathetic terms which give the impression that poor Joe was pushed into his theological sell-out. It’s time for us to grow up and allow—or better, *require*—individuals to be responsible for their own actions. Joe is not the first guy to be hurt by leadership, whether within fundamentalism or without. He won’t be the last, as unfortunate as that fact is. But to insinuate that fundamentalism is somehow holding a smoking gun because a guy threw himself over the theological ledge is way, way, way out of line. Sure, fundamentalism needs to improve, and it needs to weigh the criticisms of even its severest critics to see if they contain some truth. However, fundamentalists also need to have the discernment and bravery to call a spade a spade. Whatever the circumstances behind Joe’s departure, it’s not justified; he’s not a victim; fundamentalism isn’t to blame for a guy abandoning ship not only for evangelicalism, but for evangelicalism’s left wing.

As I said earlier, Joe was a friend of mine when we were at BJU. I’d like to continue to be his friend, our differences notwithstanding. But the idea that personal tragedies and grievances can move a professor and pastor with significant training to make wholesale theological shift is unsettling at best. As Bob Bixby notes, though Joe’s philosophy has been all over the map during the last decade, his offering himself as an authoritative voice critiquing movements has been consistent. Joe’s own instability doesn’t commend his spiritual and ecclesiastical conclusions.

Again, I think fundamentalists should be willing to learn from Joe’s lecture. Perhaps the greatest lesson learned, however, is not about accreditation or separation, but about leadership. Joe is not the first young man to be thrust into a place of leadership in a Christian college, only to make a significant theological/philosophical shift. Perhaps we shouldn’t be so quick to lay our hands on winsome leaders. Perhaps we should value substance, not just style. The fact that Joe’s lecture is so devoid of biblical content doesn’t speak well of him or the movement which gave him a fair amount of prominence.

Whether or not it’s a sad day for fundamentalism, it’s a sad day for Joe Zichterman and his family.

*This article was originally published on Pastor Anderson’s blog: www.mytwocents.wordpress.com.
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