

The Entertainment Model

Description

"I like that!" rings the golden bell for the Entertainment Model. The worst possible response would be "I don't like that!" Something must change to return to the "I like that!" response. Another fateful response is, "I'm bored." Concerned parents want to know, "Did my child like what happened?"

If people like to laugh, then humor must be included. If they prefer serious study of the Scriptures, then drop the laughs and pick up a Bible. Music, which often is divisive, clearly demonstrates what a group finds entertaining. If spectators don't like a particular genre of music, either they will leave or the musical style must change to please them. This is true whether it's a rock band or hymns, jazz or gospel. Do whatever it takes to get people to show up, and then to return. Or you can threaten to not return until the program suits what you consider acceptable or entertaining (although you probably would not use the term "entertainment").

Without written evaluations for each event or gathering, the easiest way to gauge the "I like it" meter is simply counting how many people are present. If the numbers hit the mark (or higher), it doesn't seem to matter what it took in order to get people to show up. This assumes that what takes place at the gathering is always worthwhile. Sometimes large numbers eclipse any other evaluation. If the numbers prove to be inadequate, then

something must change so that more people will be present.

In cultures with a simple lifestyle, almost anything will entertain the masses. Short-term mission trips to remote area often result in "everybody showing up" when foreign visitors arrive. The short-term missionaries feel successful because their impact drew a large number of people.

In cultures with lots of options, the Entertainment Model continues, but the responses fluctuate in a competitive market. Sometimes churches compete against each other for the best show in town. At other times, they compete with non-religious options, such as sports or concerts or recreation or the media. Some churches offer their own versions of sports, concerts, drama, recreation or social gatherings, and "free food."

Preaching, music, facilities and equipment, breadth of options, unique ministries, money, quality of performance—all fit into the bottom line of how many show up.

And that all depends on whether or not they like it!

Critique

The Entertainment Model is the most common model for youth ministry, and other ministries as well. It is also the most often criticized. It doesn't have to be negative. Just because somebody likes something doesn't make it bad. But the opposite must also be tested: just because somebody likes something doesn't mean it's good!

The Garden of Eden must have been wonderful. Many elements of creation continue to entertain, which sometimes blends with being inspired! When the Creator made humans in his image, he made them creative as well. One shouldn't be surprised when humans create entertaining elements or experiences. A musical piece that touches your soul, a well-developed and powerfully delivered sermon, a skit that you relate to immediately, a video clip that really gets you thinking—all of these can be entertaining. The crucial test is whether they take you to the creator or to the Creator—to the human instrument or the Divine source behind the human. Current idol worship presents itself in the form of human heroes from the entertainment industry, not metal or stone images. Religious celebrities aren't immune to this.

Jesus had mass gatherings and mass desertions. He fed thousands and then sent them away (Matthew 14:13-22). He led the triumphal entry into Jerusalem the same week that the crowds turned against him, shouting, "Crucify him!" (Mark 11:7-10; 15:12-14). Jesus knew what it meant for people to like him and to not like him! Clearly he had a different priority. So will his followers.

This can be confusing when leadership and/or finances dictate either an Entertainment Model or an Anti-Entertainment Model. Either

Model misses a higher purpose.

Entertainment should function as simply one of the tools God uses to connect people to Him. When entertainment fails to do that, make a change or rely on some of God's other tools.

Possibilities

Entertainment attracts Christians and non-Christians alike—it's something we share in common. God the Creator appreciates creative expression and excellence. These usually require development, coaching, honest feedback, and proper focus.

When entertainment directs a spectator or participant beyond the performer to the God who inspires, it serves its purpose well. Praising only the person denies the true Source. Praising God but not the performer ignores the God-human connection.

While encouraging the highest quality, the Entertainment Model doesn't have to go with the most expensive or most popular or most amazing thing. Simplicity, motive, and commitment make better evaluation criteria anyway. The Entertainment Model can compete in the marketplace without making that its home.