

A PLACE FOR EVERYONE
Andy Stanley

One of the problems that I have with local churches (and I am a pastor so I can say this); is that I feel like most churches are pretty much designed for church people. Have you noticed that? They are for church people. We know we can find Ephesians, you know, as fast as the pastor's wife, we know all the songs, we know where to park, we know how to get in, we know how to get out; because we are church people. Let's just say that together; We are church people, yeah, we are church people. The church is pretty much designed for church people. The problem is, every once in a while we want to invite somebody who is not a church person. In fact, you are watching this sitting in church today, and you are surrounded by people and you are thinking, You know, I am not really a church person and I feel a little bit uncomfortable here, because I am not a church person. The reason you feel a little bit uncomfortable, is because often times churches are designed for church people.

My first experience with this was many years ago when I was in graduate school. I had a friend who was not a church person, not a Christian, and over time he had put his faith in Christ and became a Christian. I was so excited, because we had lots of conversations about religion and faith and all this stuff and he was a college kid, so he's thinking hard and I'm in graduate school, so we were into that whole intellectual thing. So, he becomes a believer. I'm driving home with this conversation, and part of me was so excited about this guy, he's just found faith you know. And then, I had this sense of dread wash over me. Because I thought, Oh no, I have to take him to church! I thought, He is not going to have a clue what's going on, because he is not a church person! I went to an incredible church, but it was a church designed for church people. Right, exactly.

A few years later, I had a music studio in my basement, and I became friends with a guy who was an incredible musician in Atlanta, where I am from. This guy, a very secular guy, into the whole club scene, an incredible guy, incredible musician; and I bought lots of equipment from him. Over time, we became close friends and spent time together, and over time he finally began asking questions about faith. I began to answer some of his questions, and he began reading some books and he became a Christian. I decided I better bring him to church. I was going to an incredible church; I was even going to a famous church. People took notes and it was an awesome church; but, it was a church pretty much designed for who? For 'church people', yes. So, I will never forget, his name is Bill. I'm sitting next to Bill and I am kind of navigating him through this experience, okay? And, it's an experience that I never really thought about before because I am a church people. So, I understood that sometimes we would let people sing, who in any other context, would not be allowed to sing! And I am sitting with a professional musician, explaining to Bill; Now Bill, the reason she gets to sing is because she is the chairman of the deacon's daughter. And he went, The chairman of what? I went, Ah Deacons, you don't want to know about that! Anyway, the guy that was speaking that Sunday was

not the normal speaker, and this guy, this is so weird; every statement began with the same letter! Have you heard anybody speak that way or preach that way? Where everything is alliterated? Everything started with R, every statement, R, R. I was trying to explain this to Bill without interrupting the people around me; but see, it didn't bother me because I am a church people. But, we all went to a church that was designed for church people. The gravitational pull of every local church, of the church I get to pastor, of this church, of the church you are sitting in; the gravitational pull of the local church is toward insiders and over time, every church, if we are not careful, becomes a church for who? For church people. The problem with that is what it communicates to church people, or what it communicates to everybody in the world, is that if the church is for church people, then that means Christianity must be for 'church people'; which means, perhaps Jesus came for church people. But, not one single person listening to this message believes that. And yet, if we are not careful, we end up creating environments that are so incredibly insider oriented, that they never ever bother us. But, then people who are far away from God end up sitting in our churches and they think, I'm fine with God, but what is this? In fact, I think you've probably had this experience as well as I have; in fact, you may be one of these people. I talk to people all of the time who are fine with God, they just don't want have anything to do with church. They are fine with God; in fact, I talk to people who are fine with Jesus. I talk with people, like you do, who have a lot of respect for the Bible, you may be one of those people. But, when it comes to actually getting involved in a local church, it's like I'm not a church people, I just don't do church. And again, you begin to ask the questions and you discover it's because of the churches they've been involved with in the past, or the churches they have been invited to visit; were churches designed for church people. But, if we know intuitively, which most of us do; if we know intuitively, that Christ didn't come for church people, and if Christ didn't come for the insiders, if Christ really came for, (remember this verse?), it was one of the first verses you've ever heard; For God so loved the World....Yeah, it doesn't say for God so loved the 'church people', does it? For God so loved the good people, for God so loved the people that could find Ephesians as fast as the pastor's wife, or people who knew the words to all of the songs, who knew where to park, who knew where to get out, who knew how to get to lunch before everybody else; it doesn't even mention any of that, does it? It says, For God so loved the...world. And yet, without meaning to, because I don't think any of us do this on purpose, and I don't think the church you attend does this on purpose. But for some reason if we are not careful, the gravitational pull of the local church is towards insiders; it's towards 'church people'.

Now, here's the good news: We are not the first generation to struggle with this. In fact, one of the most fascinating stories in the New Testament is about this very issue, and if you have a Bible and want to follow along I am going to read a few verses from Acts, Chapter 15. Acts, Chapter 15, records or gives to us the events in the very first church business meeting. Now, let me just ask you a question; How many of you have ever been to a church business

meeting? Yeah, church business meetings are only interesting when? When there is a what? When there is a fight! That's right! The only time church business meetings are interesting is when there is a problem, or when there is a fight in the church. Then, you don't want to miss the church business meeting; it's free, you get in free, you get there early, you sit close to the front and you see grown-ups act like children in the name of Jesus and religion. Then, we wonder why people don't want to come to our churches! In fact, that's how most churches started; they were a split from a church, they didn't get along with somebody; that is basically how the church has multiplied all over the world, is Christians who couldn't get along. But anyway, that's not true!

Back in the first century, I mean the church, they haven't even gotten the wrapping paper off of the church, and it's brand new. Okay, it's brand new, Jesus hasn't even been gone very long and there is a problem in the local church and they have to have the very first church business meeting. The very first church business meeting is over this issue, and the issue is; who is the church for? Is the church for church people? Or, in their terms, is the church for insiders? Or, is the church for outsiders? The people involved are the people who spent time with Jesus. You are going to hear from Peter, you are going to hear from James and you are even going to hear from the Apostle Paul. I mean, these guys are like, right there with the birth of the church and before long, they are arguing over this very same issue and they have run into the same tension that all of us struggle with in the local church and that is; who is this for?

Let me read you this story. Part of it is a little bit graphic; so, hang on to this, you are a mature audience, you can handle this. Acts Chapter 15:1; now listen to this: Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers (and the brothers are the Christians, the church people): They were teaching the brothers, Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved. Unless you're circumcised, this group was saying to the people who were considering faith, unless you are circumcised, you can't be an insider, you can't be a church person, you can't experience salvation. I don't know what the requirements in your church are for membership, I don't know what the requirements are in your church are for involvement; but, I doubt they involve a surgery of any type, right? Now, listen to what the message was, I know it's kind of silly; they were saying, You can't have a relationship with God unless you are circumcised which meant, the new members class was comprised primarily of women and small children. The men sat out in the car and said, Honey, I'll just let you go in, I just don't know that I am ready to become a Christian! Now, I know it is absurd! But, imagine this; this is the very first church division. It's over, who is this for? And again, Jesus hasn't been gone long at all, and all of a sudden the gravitational pull is that this is for us, it's for those of us who know the answers to the questions. In this case, it's for Jewish people, it's for people who know the law, it's for people to know when to sit down and when to stand up and the only way you are going to be part of this club, is if you become like us.

Verse 2: This brought Paul and Barnabas (now Barnabas had been out traveling around in a primarily Greek oriented culture, telling people about Jesus and inviting people to become Christians and planting churches). So, this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with this group of people that were teaching this. So, Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem and see the apostles and elders about this question. Now, in your local church and whatever local church you've ever been a part of there is a they, right? Every organization has a they, every local church has a they. Now in the first church, in the first century, the they were the Apostles. These were the men who had hung around with Jesus, you know, what would Jesus do? You know they knew. They didn't have the bracelets, it's like we know, we were there! So, they knew the answer to the What would Jesus do question. And so, whenever there was a question in the local church regarding theology or practice or methods or whatever, they would go to these apostles because who would know better than the men who spent time with Jesus. So, they were the they and they lived in Jerusalem and so now there is this division; do men have to have surgery before they can become a Christian? Who is the church for? Do people actually have to basically become Jewish before they become Christian? You know, who is the church for? What makes an outsider an insider? Who is going to feel welcome? How are we going to treat them? You know, this whole thing is going on; and so, they decide to have a business meeting and thus the very church business meeting. It was well attended because there was a problem, there was a fight.

Verse 4: When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church (because there was a church in Jerusalem) and the apostles and the elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. So Paul and Barnabas say, Now, I know there is a division and there is a question about who is supposed to be a part of the church. But, let me tell you what we have experienced. Verse 5: Then some of the believers (now these are Christians) who belonged to the party of the Pharisees (and if you are familiar with Bible study, the Pharisees were kind of like the Klingons; they were like the perennial enemies of the Christians in the local church and this was the group that was behind the crucifixion of Jesus, you may know that); and specifically, these Pharisees had become Christians. So, this is pretty amazing, especially if you are skeptical about the Bible or the roots of Christianity; here's a group of people that were behind the crucifixion of Jesus, who after he died; in other words, after they were successful in getting rid of him, became believers. Now why would that happen? What in the world would cause a religious person like a Pharisee who was behind the crucifixion of Jesus, to become a follower of Jesus? There is really only one answer to that question, and that is that there was a resurrection of Jesus, and once there was a resurrection of Jesus, these Pharisees went, I think we may have gotten that one wrong, and became followers of Jesus and joined the local church. But, even that these were the ultimate insiders, because they knew the law and they knew what to do and what not to do. So these Pharisees stood up and said (now this is in this business meeting now); The Gentiles

must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses. That is what they have got to do to become Christians because the church is for the believers, the church is for the educated, the church is for the people who know what to do and know what not to do and are committed and all that stuff.

Verse 7: After much discussion, (long business meeting) Peter got up and addressed them, and he said this; Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles (that's the non-Jewish people) might hear from my lips the message of the Gospel and believe. He said, Now look, you remember that I was called to tell Gentiles about Jesus, (they all shook their head yes). Verse 8: "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us." Now, this was a shock to the Jews, because the Jewish people believe that the Holy Spirit was reserved for Jewish people, and Peter said; Remember, we've seen evidence of the fact that God has given the Holy Spirit to people who weren't Jews. Now this was very difficult because they were the ultimate insiders and they didn't want to let the fence down too low and open the gate too wide and what if they don't do the right thing, and what if they don't eat the right stuff and what if they are offensive. Peter was going, Remember, remember, the Gospel is for everybody; not just the church people."

Verse 9: "He" (God) "made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then" (I love this verse, this is verse 10); if you are watching this and you are sitting in church and you are thinking, You know, one of the things I don't like about church people is their hypocrites,ö listen to this verse, this is awesome because this means there has been hypocrites since the first century in church, okay, it's nothing new! Here is what he said, (this should be good news to some of us); verse 10: "Now then, why do you test God by putting on the necks of the disciples" (the disciples in this case were the new believers, these people that were coming to faith); "why do you put on the neck of the disciples a yoke or a burden, that neither we nor our fathers are able to bear?" Now, let me tell you what that verse means, this is very important. He said, Look, (he's talking to Jewish people, insider people, the kind of church people of that particular age); he says, Look, you are taking a burden" (which is the Law of Moses, there were 316 laws, some people say 614 laws, depending on how you count them, not just 10; we know the Ten Commandments, there are like 600 more); he said, "you want to take all 600 of these commandments, and you want to place them on the necks of these brand new Christians. That is, you want them to keep the whole Law of Moses. Then he says this, You haven't even done well with this yourself, have you? Frank, back in the back, you know, isn't it true; didn't you have to go to temple and make a sacrifice for your sin? Frank, Yeah. Didn't you grow up knowing the law Frank, since you were a little boy? And what about you Ben? Ben, I saw you at the temple and you had the goat and that bird and all that stuff and you were making a sacrifice for your sin? Ben, you haven't kept the law perfectly, Ben? No! Well, Ben, weren't you raised in this? I mean, shouldn't you know better? Haven't you known the Torah since you were a little boy, Ben? Yeah. Well, Ben, Frank, and the rest of you;

if we can't even pull it off and we have been good Jewish boys and grown men. We understand Jewish culture and the Law of Moses, if we couldn't off, why in the world do we want to put this on the backs of these new people that are coming to faith? It was quiet in the meeting at that point, I think. Verse 11: No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. Now the meeting goes on for awhile. Now, here's what you don't know; the number one guy in the local church in the first century was a guy named James. The reason when James stood to speak everybody hushed, was because James was a very, very special person in the church in Jerusalem. The reason he was a special person, does anybody know? He was the brother of Jesus. Now, this is amazing, if you are skeptical about Christianity just check this out; what would it take for your brother to convince you that he was the Son of God? No matter what miracles he performed, you're going, That's good, good trick, you are not the Son of God! I know he was dead, and now He's walking around, but you are not the Son of God; I mean, you are special, you're weird, you're a freak, but you're not!" Now here is what is amazing; here is what we know. James, the brother of Jesus didn't become a follower of Jesus until late in the game, and rightfully so. It's my kid brother; you guys are taking him way too seriously, okay? So, James becomes a follower of Jesus. I think that is a huge argument that you have to take Christianity seriously; but anyway, James is like 'the guy' in the meeting. So James, the brother of Jesus stands; and when he stands to speak everybody listens and he sort of sat back and listened to this whole conversation. I absolutely love this verse, I think this should be the marching order for every church leader and anybody who is serious about creating a church that is pleasing to God. Listen to what James said; It is my judgment" (and I am telling you, when James said, "This is my judgment, that means this is the decision, here we go, I've listened to the debate, here is the decision). It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. "We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." The mission of the local church in the first century and now should be; we should not make it difficult for those who are turning to God. In other words, anything in your local church, or my local church that's a stumbling block for people who are turning to God, we need to get rid of. Now the interesting thing is this; the cross is a stumbling block. I mean at some point, you follow, you follow, you get closer, closer, closer, closer, and then you get to the Jesus part and you've got to make a decision. People stumble over Jesus. People say, I'll take God" and you know, and I will take 2 of those and 4 of those, but don't give me Jesus. And Jesus said, you know, people are going to get crazy and mixed up and kind of emotional about the cross part and the Jesus part and you know, that is fine. What James is saying is this; it's okay if people choose to reject the cross, but let's don't put a whole lot of other things in their way that cause them to get confused before they get to the issue, which is the cross. And so, James says, "Then the local church, let's make it our mission not to make it difficult." The other way of saying that is this; let's do everything we can do to make it easy for those who are turning to (and I love this part), he doesn't say Jesus, he doesn't say faith, he says, "Let's make it easy for those who are

turning to God." The church, the local church, this church, my church, your church; should be characterized by an environment, a culture, an atmosphere, a spirit that says we are going to do everything we can to make it easy for people to continue to move toward, move toward, move toward and pursue intimacy, a relationship with God, who has invited everyone to call Him Heavenly Father.

Verse 20: Instead we should write to them, (that's these Gentiles in all these different cities waiting for the news; do I have to have surgery to be saved? You know they are waiting for this meeting to get over); Instead we should write to them, telling them, (and now listen to this, he takes six hundred and something laws, the Ten Commandments, the whole teaching of Moses, and they condense it down to a few things). We should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols (because that was offensive to Jews), from sexual immorality, from meat of strangled animals and from blood (because again that was offensive to Jewish people, that is what he says). Verse 21; For (that means because) Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. This is so interesting, so what he says is this; there are a few things we need to ask our Gentile believers and friends to do. Let's ask them not to offend strict dietary, Jewish oriented people. Not because it's a sin to do these things, but because Moses has been taught in all these cities and there are many people that are offended by that kind of thing. So, let's be sensitive (the whole argument turns), let's be sensitive to the insiders and to the things that they are sensitive to, but let's not strap on 600 other laws to keep people from coming to faith.

Verse 30: So they agreed that this would be the case and they wrote this out and they sent a delegation out to these churches and these new churches and new believers that were all around the area. Listen to this, verse 30: "The men were sent off and they went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter." (They said, here is the letter, we've just come from the meeting, James stood up and spoke and here's the conclusion.) "The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message." And I wrote at the end of mine; and especially the men! Now, you know what is so interesting about that? That is so clear. The brother of Jesus says, Here's your marching orders, let's not make it difficult.

Another generation later, the church made it difficult again. In 1091, the Pope, the leader of the Western Christianity, the Pope, issued an edict that we are going to war against unbelievers and sent thousands of men into Jerusalem to reclaim real estate and to take the lives of tens of thousands of people.

In the 1400's, the Spanish Inquisition, the church, us, the church, the followers of Christ; arrested and tortured people for all kinds of ridiculous things in an effort to grab land. Nothing, nothing reflected the message of Jesus and the New Testament.

The Reformation came along and suddenly there was this new wave of enthusiasm around, people being able to embrace faith personally and

it was simple again. And then, the birth of denominations, and we made it difficult all over again.

I don't understand this exactly, but we are all potential victims of it, those of you who would say, I'm a follower of Christ and those of you who are still trying to figure it out, that for some reason the local church, the local church will always gravitate toward making this for insiders. The local church will always gravitate towards making it difficult for those who are turning to God. One of the greatest commitments that we can make in our local churches all over this country, is that no matter what else we do, every once in awhile we are going to sit down and ask the question, What are we doing that's making it difficult for people who are turning to God? And, if you are sitting in church today and you would say, I haven't yet come to terms with the Jesus thing, I have questions about God, I have questions about the Bible, I'm still trying to figure it out. You know what, if you are listening to this message, you are in a local church that is committed to figuring this out. In fact, one of the reasons you have enjoyed attending the church you are attending is because you are around a group of people who have figured out how to take away some of the difficulty. You say to yourself, You know, this is a different kind of church, it's a church like no other church I've ever attended. One of the things that you are experiencing, even though you haven't thought of it in these terms is this; you are around a group of people who are committed to take away everything offensive except the one thing that at some point you have to grapple with. And that is this question; not, what kind of church is it? Not, do I like the music? Not, is it casual or contemporary, the issue is this, is, who is Jesus Christ? And we think it's okay to wrestle with that, and we think it's okay for the cross to be a stumbling block; but, in the meantime, we are committed to doing everything we can to take away everything that makes it difficult for people who are slowly, or over time, who are turning to God. You know why? Because we believe the Gospel is for 'everybody', don't we? Listen, this is the Gospel: Everybody is invited, everybody gets in the same way, and everybody can meet the requirement. 'Everybody' is invited, which means we have to create local churches that have all the rungs on the ladder. And in many of our local churches, isn't it true? We've got the top rungs, these are the people who know where to park and know how to find Ephesians, and know the words to the songs. But, we've decided that we want to create churches with all the rungs on the ladder, because we believe the church is for 'everybody'. It's for the person who has questions about scripture, it's for the person who has had a bad experience in a local church, it's for a person that doesn't know how to act, doesn't know how to dress. We want to have all the rungs, because we believe the local church is for 'everybody', because the Gospel is for 'everybody', and 'everybody' can meet the requirement. The church is for 'everybody', because the Gospel is for 'everybody', 'everybody' is invited, 'everybody' can meet the requirement and what is the requirement? It's simply faith in Jesus Christ, His Savior.

So, here's my challenge to you as church leaders. Here's my challenge to those of you who are 'church people'. You grew up like

me in the local church. You learned the stories in the local church, you know what flannel graph is, and if the people around you don't, that's okay, you don't need to explain. You brought your envelope to church, you know what a quarterly is, you know what a Sunday school lesson is, you are like me, you are a 'church person'; here's my challenge for you and to me: For our generation, let's be a generation of professional church people, lay people, volunteers, whatever your capacity is in your church. Let's be a generation that decides to put all the rungs back in the ladder. Because, since Christ came for 'everybody', since Christianity is for 'everybody', we believe the local church should be for 'everybody' as well. We believe what James says, that Let's not make it difficult for those who are turning to God.

Would you pray with me please? Heavenly Father, thank you for the person that introduced most of us to faith in your Son. Thank you, Father, for churches where we heard this message in such a simple, clear fashion that we were able to embrace it. Many of us embraced it as children. Thank you Father, this day that most of us are right now sitting in churches that are committed to this principle. But Father, I pray that you would show each of us as individuals and as leaders, wherever we are in our local church, show each of us what we can do personally to make sure that our local church never becomes a church that accidentally makes it difficult for those who are turning to God, and that we would be men and women committed to systems and programs and facilities that make it easy and make it accessible; because we believe that John 3:16 is absolutely true, that you love the whole world and that our church is to reflect that value and that commitment. We pray all of these things Father, in Jesus' amazing Name, amen.