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Bouncers at the Church Door? A Controversy Over Church Ads

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The United Church of Christ is one of the nation’s most liberal denominations, and the group has taken liberal positions on a range of moral issues ranging from abortion to homosexuality. The group is hard-wired to liberal theology and its policy positions veer to the far left on the political and ideological spectrum. Founded in 1957 through the union of several historic traditions, the central heritage of the church is identified with Congregationalism. Clearly, the UCC has moved a long way from the puritanism of the Pilgrims.

Mainline Protestant denominations have been losing members for years, with most groups reporting thousands of lost members annually. As a way of reversing this trend of membership decline, the UCC planned a major media campaign, intending to use advertising to attract new members and maintain loyalty of its current adherents.

In a news release dated November 29, 2004, the UCC’s national office announced “a nationwide advertising campaign, running Dec. 1-26, that includes TV commercials airing on network and cable stations.” The release went on to specify that, “in stark contrast to prevailing rhetoric about moral values,” the UCC would present “an edgy allegory in a campaign targeted to Americans who feel alienated from church.”

The campaign, known as “Still Speaking,” released its first advertisement in the form of a 30-second commercial that features, by its own description, “two muscle-bound ‘bouncers’ standing guard outside a fabled, picturesque church and selecting which persons are permitted to attend Sunday services.” As the video continues, written text declares, “Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.” A narrated voice then “proclaims the United Church of Christ’s commitment to Jesus’ extravagant welcome: ‘No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.’”

Ron Buford, the campaign’s director, suggested that the commercial “reflects the very real rejection people feel about church.”

In the advertisement, a same-sex couple is among the persons turned away by the “bouncers” as they try to enter the church. The message is unambiguous—the United Church of Christ accepts homosexuals and homosexuality, and suggests that churches who do not follow their example are violating the message and methodology of Jesus Christ. As the UCC’s website explains, “like Jesus—the United Church of Christ seeks to welcome all people, regardless of ability, age, race, economic circumstance or sexual orientation.”

A heated controversy arose December 2, when the UCC complained that two of the three major networks, CBS and NBC, had rejected its commercial, citing policies that prevent acceptance of advocacy advertising.

Later, ABC also revealed that it would not air the ads, though the commercials will appear on its ABC Family network. Local network affiliates throughout the country may still run the ad, and the commercial is set to run on cable

networks including AMC, BET, Discovery, Fox, Hallmark, Travel, TBS, and TNT, as well as TV Land.

In a statement sent to the United Church of Christ, CBS stated that it rejected the commercial because it did not accept advertising “on one side of a current controversial issue of public importance.” According to a report published in *The Washington Post*, CBS went on to say: “Because this commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups . . . and the fact that the Executive Branch has recently proposed a Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast on the Networks.” NBC did not specify the precise reason for its rejection of the ads, simply identifying the commercials as “too controversial.” Later, ABC specified that its policy prevented acceptance of advertisements dealing with religious issues.

The church immediately protested the networks’ decision. “This is a quite wholesome message that is being censored out,” said the Reverend John H. Thomas, the UCC’s General Minister and President. He told *The New York Times* that the advertisement had run in several parts of the country without protest. Several sources expressed outrage that the networks had refused to run the advertisements, and some blamed a “conservative backlash” and fear of evangelical intimidation as reasons for the network’s decision. The UCC’s president accused the networks of hypocrisy. “We find it disturbing that the networks in question seem to have no problem exploiting gay persons through mindless comedies or titillating dramas, but when it comes to a church’s loving welcome of committed gay couples, that’s where they draw the line.”

The networks may reconsider their decisions, and the UCC seems determined to press on with its advertising campaign, regardless of network access. The larger issue comes down to the actual content of the commercial and the message it presents.

By any measure, the short video is a masterful piece of political propaganda. Using familiar propaganda devices, the commercial insinuates that the United Church of Christ is accepting of all persons, while others—presumably conservative churches—are so restrictive that they do not allow homosexuals and other sinners to enter the church building. The use of black-shirted bouncers to turn these people away is a very powerful visual device. When the announcer soothingly declares, “Jesus didn’t turn away people and neither do we,” it completes the message with a powerful effect.

But, is this an accurate presentation of Jesus, the Gospel, and the nature of the church? Not hardly. In the first place, there are no black-shirted bouncers outside evangelical churches. The United Church of Christ—in keeping with its liberal theology—has largely erased the distinction between the church and the world. Evangelical churches welcome all persons for the preaching of the Gospel, hoping to see persons from every background, every ethnic identity, every language, and every pattern of sin, come to know salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. The UCC commercial is not really dealing with access to the church for purposes of hearing the Gospel, however. Far beyond this, the UCC suggests that homosexuals, openly living the homosexual lifestyle, are fully welcome within the membership of UCC congregations. This is absolutely consistent with established UCC policies, with its practice of ordaining homosexual ministers, and with the acceptance, in at least some of their churches, of “blessings” for homosexual unions. The UCC has joined with other liberal Protestant denominations in opposing a Federal Marriage Amendment, and the message of the commercial is unambiguous, unlike those churches that believe the Gospel presents a way out of sin, the UCC simply dismisses with the very idea that homosexuality is sinful in the first place.

And what about Jesus? Is it accurate to declare that “Jesus didn’t turn away people?” The New Testament is clear that Jesus freely identified with sinners, outraging the moral hypocrites of his day and turning upside down the logic of first-century Judaism. Jesus ate with sinners, was found in conversation with them, and explained to his own disciples that, even as a doctor is not sent to the healthy, but to the sick, he had come “to seek and to save the lost.” Nevertheless, Jesus did not invite sinners to remain in their sin, but to find liberation, salvation, and transformation through the grace of God. He pointed to his own atoning work as the ground of salvation and, as he instructed the woman caught in adultery, those saved by grace are to “go and sin no more.”

In other words, the Christian Gospel does not declare God’s unconditional acceptance of sinners as sinners—but rather God’s acceptance as sinners who come to Christ by faith, repent of their sins, and become disciples of the Savior.

Though it is often attempted, Jesus cannot be turned into some form of twenty-first century libertine, simply telling sinners to “be happy.” As John the Baptist declared, he came as the Lamb of God, who “takes away the sins of the world.”

The United Church of Christ advertising campaign is not likely to win new converts. In one sense, the entire campaign is a pathetic attempt to stem membership losses by using the media rather than getting to the base of the problem—a horribly accommodated theology. The real problem in the United Church of Christ is not low media visibility, but a tragically high tolerance for heresy. The conservative churches and denominations—the very groups targeted for scorn in the UCC commercial—are the groups growing and gaining members. Why? Because the authentic Gospel draws sinners, who recognize in the gospel of Jesus Christ the only way out of our predicament, the only means of our salvation, and God’s sole provision for our redemption.

The UCC takes its “Still Speaking” theme for this campaign from John Robinson, the famous leader and pastor of the Pilgrims. Robinson famously stated, “God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s Holy Word.” Robinson was surely correct—as the Bible is the living and active Word of God. Nevertheless, God’s truth will not break forth in the form of a denial of biblical truth and the authentic Gospel. The greatest tragedy with regard to this advertising campaign is not the controversy over the ads, but the message the church is trying to communicate in the first place. Christ saves sinners. That is the great good news of the Gospel—for homosexuals, and for everyone else.

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