

The Gospel According to Starbucks

My love of coffee is no secret. So it was with great interest – while Lola and I were vacationing in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, several years ago – that we happened across a television interview with Howard Schultz, who built Starbucks into a global business empire.

The interview was being conducted in a Starbucks store in Seattle, Washington, with customers coming and going in the background.

“What is it about your coffee that you can charge as much as \$5 for a cup?” the interviewer asked.

Surprisingly, Schultz – without hesitating – replied, “It’s not about the coffee. It’s about relationships, with our associates and with the people we serve.”

He went on to explain that the company works hard to retain its employees, with stock options and good benefits, so that over time, they get to know and interact with customers. Starbucks, he said, seeks to provide a place of connectivity with folks.

The next morning, when we stopped at a Starbucks store, I decided to test the associates there on what Schultz had said.

I asked the barista who was serving me if she had seen the interview. No, she said, she had not, but she wished she had known about it.

“So how long have you worked here?” I asked her. She grinned, and with some obvious pride, said. “For eight years.”

“How about you?” I asked another. She had worked at this store for nine years.


“What has kept you here?” I continued. Each, in her own way, responded that the company took good care of them. “And our customers have become our friends,” one added.

Those are the same conclusions drawn by Leonard Sweet, the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew Theological Seminary at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, and an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church.

A few years ago, Sweet wrote a book called *The Gospel According to Starbucks*. Lifting up Starbucks as one of the capitalist wonders of the modern world, Sweet insisted that the church has much to learn from the local coffee hangout.

“This philosophy of the founder of Starbucks is simple,” he wrote. “For him, selling coffee is his *grand passion*, except that it is not about the coffee. Starbucks is not a coffee shop – it is a lifestyle.”

(more)



It is what Sweet calls “a third place” – a place that every human being needs; a place of comfort and community and connection. It is a place beyond home and work.

Church used to be that third place for most Americans, but not so much anymore. Instead, the music, the techy comfort, the quiet neighborhood hubbub of the local coffee shop have made a place where strangers become friends.

The late Maya Angelou, poet, author, singer and civil rights activist, stressed the need for “Jesus to visit us again” – and we need to recover the radical, rich and real power that the living Christ offers us – inside the church and out.

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him (Acts 10:38 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter