

Let the Biblical Buyer Beware!

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Today's church is experiencing two new and deadly influences: "biblical" marketing and "biblical" movies. Nothing in recent history has impacted evangelical Christian churches as pervasively and powerfully as these phenomena.

"Biblical" marketing is an attempt to use the latest sales concepts and marketing principles to attract the lost in the hope that they will be won to Christ. The approach begins with a survey and an analysis of the community in order to discover what would motivate the lost to attend a local church. Once the survey is evaluated, the structure of the organization is conformed to accommodate the stated desires of the unsaved. Such changes usually include key elements that will make the lost feel more comfortable: a contemporary and entertaining style of music, a positive, non-convicting, feel-good message with dramatic illustrations and stimulating programs oriented more to the flesh than to the spirit. One of the theories is that the more the church reflects the culture familiar to the lost, the more likely it is that they will continue to attend.

The potential problems with such an approach have been addressed in more detail in the February and March 2004 issues, but it's important to reiterate that the gospel *cannot* be marketed to the lost. Why not? Because the biblical gospel doesn't fit into what marketing is all about. All basic definitions of marketing emphasize that the customers themselves are the priority; their particular wants and perceived needs must be identified. The customer's satisfaction is critical and he must be accommodated—even to the point of making "positive" changes in the product, i.e., self-indulging modifications.

It should be obvious to anyone with a basic understanding of God's Word that the biblical gospel is clearly at odds with a marketing approach. The gospel is the gift of eternal life for all those who come to the end of themselves, who recognize that they are sinners separated from a holy God and that there is absolutely nothing they can do to merit salvation. Self-oriented desires, i.e., "felt needs," "making the customer feel good about himself," and all other such marketing devices are the *enemies* of the gospel of grace.

The Apostle Paul, whom God inspired to present the gospel with absolute clarity throughout his epistles, wrote, "This is a

faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tm 1:15). That understanding must be in the heart of anyone who would receive Christ.

Try a massive marketing campaign with such a message today. Any ad agency would laugh it to scorn! Is it possible that Paul could have missed a more effective "felt needs" approach? Or perhaps the time was just not right to introduce marketing the gospel? Hardly. Paul not only knew his day, but the Holy Spirit gave him a view of our day: "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves..." (2 Tm 3:1,2). Our self-serving bias began at mankind's fall into sin in the Garden of Eden, and the focus on self has risen to "perilous" levels as the Lord's return draws near. Again, marketing to *self* is not the way to introduce biblical salvation. Self itself is the problem.

Astonishingly, pointing out this very simple yet fundamental error of attempting to market the gospel is all too often met with responses such as: "Yes, but our church is using it with great success"; "If just one person gets saved, it makes no difference what your arguments are!"; "The church needs to adopt twenty-first century methods to speak to our twenty-first century culture!" Somehow, for many Christians, when the subject is of a spiritual nature, unreasonableness is acceptable if not preferred. But what if the subject turned secular, and involved, say, an investment opportunity, and it was recommended that the following new formula (backed up by a host of personal testimonies) would substantially increase one's bank account: "two plus two equals five"?

The blinding influence of greed aside, Christians would reject the proposal outright because it simply didn't add up. Furthermore, even if it initially began to produce big returns, nearly everyone could see that those foolish enough to invest in such a program would soon reap the disastrous consequences of a foundationally unsound endeavor. On the other hand, when it comes to fundamental errors regarding the "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3), there is a growing tendency for believers to take a leap beyond reason, common sense, and, ironically, biblical sense.

Part of the problem is that aggressive marketing nearly always produces impressive results. At the very least, it generates activities and excitement that are interpreted as a proof of success. As a friend of mine puts it, "Most church-growth schemes do produce nickels and noses!" In going about God's

business, however, the Lord is very clear that He wants us to do things His way. The prophet Jeremiah warned, "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (2:13).

What makes today's so-called biblical marketing approach far more ominous than other secular trends and fads that the church has implemented in the last century is the *core philosophy* from which the marketing approach is drawn. It is basically a management theories system that is humanistic and transformational, which means that the purveyors of this philosophy are working toward solving community problems (and ultimately the world's) *without God* by getting people to think in a new way (i.e., their way). Their objective is to produce a humanity that has exchanged a mindset for a "mindflex," that is, those willing to give up fixed beliefs (such as biblical doctrines and absolutes) in order to pursue the middle ground in the hope of reconciling differences that hamper "building relationships." The goals are peace, harmony, inclusiveness, and tolerance, for the greater good and productivity of the community.

Although the goals and methodology certainly sound good in general (and even better when mixed with biblical terminology and ideals), they are "a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is the way of death" (Prv 14:12). Proponents of "systems theory" thinking have targeted the church as an agent for transforming society—but certainly not according to the "narrow way" Jesus declares in Matthew 7:13,14. The church itself must undergo a transformation: from being Christ-centered, submitted to His Word and *only* His solution for mankind's salvation, to a man-centered endeavor in support of humanity's social welfare. Contenders for "the faith" (Jude 3) must become simply "people of faith," working for the "good of society." Since pastors and pastoral staff members are the teachers and trusted leaders of their congregations, they are potentially the ideal agents for this transformation. The process is gradual and seductive, beginning at a very pragmatic level, with church growth being the magnet. Marketing and management systems principles are promoted, and the pastors are exhorted to function as "corporate managers" and "change agents" of their churches.

Evidence of this trend is manifest throughout Christendom, most particularly in the "seeker-friendly way of doing church." The two men most influential in spreading

the marketing/management systems (with their globalist and communitarian goals) to evangelical churches are Peter Drucker, whom the business world recognizes as the elder statesman of modern management theories, and Bob Buford, head of Leadership Network, an organization that trains pastors and staffs of large churches in marketing/management principles. Buford also heads up the Peter Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management.

In an extensive interview with Drucker, *Christianity Today* notes their wide influence: "Over the last 20 years Drucker has had a good deal of interaction with what he calls 'pastoral' churches. These include megachurches like Bill Hybels's Willow Creek or Rick Warren's Saddleback Community. Bob Buford's Leadership Network has invited Drucker to speak to conferences of large-church leaders and has linked them to many pastors seeking [church-growth] advice."¹ Rick Warren is especially taken with Drucker's concepts: "I read everything Peter Drucker writes. His book, *The Effective Executive*, is a favorite I re-read every year."² Drucker, in turn, is gratified to see his humanistic concepts take hold in increasing numbers of churches and parachurch organizations, which he regards as playing a new and central role in a new form of society.³ Willow Creek, according to Drucker, stands out as an example of "what business can learn from non-profits," and Saddleback's mega-church model, he states, is "the most significant phenomenon of the second half of [the twentieth] century." Would the undiluted teachings of Christ ever win such acclaim from the secular world?

No doubt few of the biblically oriented churches and pastors that are participating in this systems-theory laden approach to church growth understand what they are buying into. Nevertheless, they have (wittingly or unwittingly) taken on worldly baggage and are headed down a road littered with anti-biblical means and methods. How far-reaching is the damage? Simply go to the Willow Creek and Saddleback websites to get a sense of their influence.

Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (which is peppered with General Systems Theories concepts couched in pseudo-biblical language—check our website or contact us for a detailed critique of *TP-DL*), has sold upwards of 15 million copies (used by organizations from the White House staff to the Oakland Raiders). Over 20,000 churches have participated in "40 Days of Purpose." More than 320,000 pastors and church leaders (including Catholics and Mormons) from around the world have attended "Purpose-Driven" seminars, while 115,000 pastors subscribe to "Rick Warren's Ministry Toolbox," which gives access to his sermons and guidance in how to "group-develop" sermons with other pastors. Willow Creek, with its Association of churches

numbering around 10,000, is another major herald of integrating this management/marketing approach into church life, which one discerning critic perceptively labeled "Outcome-based religion."

Surely Warren and Hybels are aware of the roots of what they are promoting. Why are they and hundreds of thousands of shepherds (many, I'm sure, from Bible-oriented churches) leading their flocks down this path paved by man's methods and means? Where is biblical discernment? Where is awareness of what they are feeding their sheep? By trusting in men, are they leading them to "conform to the world" (Rom 12:2) and unintentionally directing them away from the Word?

Then there is the second pervasive influence—the "biblical" movie.

Is the world in the church and the church in the world to such an extent these days that most believers can no longer discern biblical truth from religious counterfeits? It was disturbing enough that the evangelical church became the primary audience for Mel Gibson's intentionally Roman Catholic movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. But it was utterly shocking that reviews of the movie by evangelical Christian leaders, scholars, and (incredibly) apologetic organizations called it "biblically accurate!"

Not even fifteen minutes into the film the audience was subjected to a host of Gibson's screen interpretations of the writings of a soon-to-be-canonized "Saint"—an eighteenth-century nun, whose mystical visions were received from spirit apparitions. It opens in the Garden of Gethsemane, where the Jesus character appears terribly anxious over the physical sufferings he knows he's about to endure, followed by Satan tempting him (wrong angel in the wrong garden!) and directing a large serpent toward the praying "Christ" that he crushes with his foot, followed a little later by the Jesus character being dragged along by soldiers who then pitch him off a bridge from which he dangles by his chains while being given the opportunity to confront the traitor Judas, who was hiding beneath the bridge. Criticism directed at the unbiblical content of the above scenes and the multitude of others, equally unbiblical, throughout the movie was answered by evangelicals claiming "artistic license" on director Gibson's behalf—while at the same time declaring the film to be faithful to Scripture. How does one reconcile "artistic license" with "biblical accuracy"? (See *Showtime for the Sheep?* for a detailed critique.)

As with "biblical" marketing, here again we have problems that go deeper and will have long-term effects upon the church. For all the adverse influence of *The Passion*, biblical critics took some comfort in the hope that its impact on the church would be limited to the time of its theatrical run, which lasted only a month or so. In other words, out of sight, out of mind, resulting in limited spiritual damage. Alas, wishful thinking. The recently released

DVD/video sold 4.5 million copies the first day, thanks to an aggressive marketing campaign directed at the church. First-year sales are predicted to exceed 20 million. (Amazon.com, the largest "bookstore" in the world, offers *The Passion of the Christ! The Purpose-Driven Life* discount package—their two bestselling religious items!) This means that evangelical churches throughout the U.S. and abroad will be using what Gibson calls his "very Marian film" as an ongoing resource for their Sunday school programs, Bible studies, Wednesday evening group meetings, outreach programs, and so forth.

Even more troublesome, however, is the enthusiasm *The Passion* has created for allegedly presenting the Bible visually. Why is that a problem? Interpreting the Scriptures in a visual medium is the most subjective and least accurate of any method of presenting God's Word. No matter how dramatic and emotionally moving a biblical production may be, it nevertheless is not God's Word but a series of interpretations: how a film director personally "sees" what is declared in the Bible, how an actor thinks a biblical character would act (including the God-Man Jesus!), how the art director and set decorator imagine the scenes of thousands of years ago to have appeared—the details of which (for God's own reasons) the Bible does not supply. That's only a partial list of man's additions to God's Word, to which nothing must ever be added.

Concerning "biblical" marketing or "biblical" movies, the bottom line for the believer is this: Do we want to do things God's way or man's way? Will the Bible be our absolute authority in how we go about living our lives, growing in the faith, and sharing that faith with others—or not? The Lord tells us that in His Word He has given us "all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him" (2Pt 1:3). Why, then, are we turning to the world's means and methodologies? Could it be that in opting for the unbiblical process of pragmatism (because it seems to work), we don't see that we are essentially turning away from the Scriptures?

Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). It's imperative that in these days marked by the church's obvious appetite for the world, that we hunger for His objective Word, not the subjective opinions of men. If paraphrase Bible versions are a plague upon biblical literacy (which they are indeed), then visual Bible "versions" sound its death knell. Weep for our next generation, which is now being progressively weaned off the written Word of God.

Let us all take to heart and mind the sobering words of God to Israel: "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein." (Jer 6:16). Let the biblical buyer beware. TBC