

MARKET-DRIVEN MINISTRY: BLESSING OR CURSE?

Part Two[†]

by
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The intent of the initial article in this two-part series¹ was to acquaint the reader with the philosophy and practices of the marketing movement and to evaluate the practical and biblical arguments it makes in order to justify its existence. The purpose of this article is to expose the errors of the foundational premises of the movement and the pragmatic methodology which flows out of them. Whatever benefits may have resulted from the marketing philosophy, its detriments far outweigh them. The central philosophical tenet, making the church and/or gospel attractive to the lost (euphemistically labeled “seekers” or “unchurched”), combined with a highly pragmatic, utilitarian approach to ministry, yields tragic results.

THE FOUNDATIONAL PREMISES OF MINISTRY MARKETING ARE MAN-CENTERED

Marketing has been defined within the business community as “a management orientation that holds that the key to achieving organizational goals consists of the organization’s determining the needs and wants of target markets and adapting itself to delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than its competitors.”² Those who advocate utilizing marketing principles for ministry purposes have suggested the following definitions:

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¹David M. Doran, “Market-Driven Ministry: Blessing or Curse,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Spring 1996): 54–84.

²Philip Kotler, *Principles of Marketing*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 22.

Marketing is the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from the producer to the consumer, to satisfy the needs and desires of the consumer *and* the goals and objectives of the producer.³

For now, think of marketing as the activities that allow you, as a church, to identify and understand people's needs, identify your resources and capabilities, and to engage in a course of action that will enable you to use your resources and capabilities to satisfy the needs of the people to whom you wish to minister. Marketing is the process by which you seek to apply your product to the desires of the target population.⁴

Marketing is the analysis, planning, staffing, implementation and control of programs composed of various controllable activities to bring about exchanges with target markets in order to satisfy these target markets and accomplish the objectives of the ministry.⁵

Marketing is a process for making concrete decisions about what the religious organization can do, and not do, to achieve its mission. Marketing is not selling, advertising, or promotion—though it may include all of these. *Marketing is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs to bring about voluntary "exchanges" with specifically targeted groups for the purpose of achieving the organization's missional objectives....* Most of all, marketing is a process for building *responsiveness* into a religious organization—responsiveness to those myriad groups whose needs must be satisfied if the organization is to be successful in its ministry endeavors.⁶

These definitions allow certain core principles to be identified: (1) assessment of the needs, wants and desires of the target market is absolutely essential; (2) success in marketing is evaluated by the ability to meet these needs better than competitors; and (3) meeting these needs demands adaptation by the marketer to the market, not vice versa. It is these principles which cause the adaptation of marketing to the ministry realm to go astray. The essence of all three is a man-centeredness which fails to honor the God-centeredness demanded by Scripture. More specifically, they advocate an approach to ministry which is man-centered in its purpose, confidence, and strategy.

³George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), p. 41.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵John W. Pearson and Robert D. Hisrich, *Marketing Your Ministry* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, 1990), p. 8.

⁶Norman Shawchuck, Philip Kotler, Bruce Wrenn, and Gustave Rath, *Marketing for Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), p. 22.

The Purpose for Ministry in a Marketing Orientation Is Man-Centered

George Barna writes, “Ministry, in essence, has the same objective as marketing: to meet people’s needs. Christian ministry, by definition, meets people’s needs by providing them with biblical solutions to their life circumstances.”⁷ While this statement seems harmless to many, perhaps even applaudable to some, this thesis must be challenged. The church’s ultimate purpose for ministry is not to meet the needs of people. This was not the ultimate purpose of our Lord Jesus Christ’s ministry. It is beyond the scope of this article to defend this point fully, but Scripture resounds with the call to live and minister foremost for the glory of God, not the good of man. The Lord provides the basic framework for biblical ministry: He glorified the Father by declaring His Name to the disciples through giving them His Word (John 17:4–8). The compelling mission of the Son was to do the will of the Father (John 5:30). He would lay down His life and take it up again because He received “this commandment” from the Father (John 10:18).⁸ He prepared His disciples for His departure by reminding them that His death was not because the devil had any claim on Him, but “that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do” (John 14:31).⁹

It is critical to recognize the difference between ministry governed by the pursuit of meeting needs and ministry governed by pleasing God. Obviously, these two concerns are not antithetical, but only one can be the *governing* principle. Christ’s pattern was clear. Pleasing the Father was the first concern of His ministry; meeting needs was defined and proscribed by this concern. His first concern actually compelled Him on occasion to ignore the needs of people to concentrate His attention on preaching (Mark 1:35–38). As one writer observes,

Christ’s primary ministry is to the Father for the sake of the world, not to the world for the sake of the Father. This means that the world does not set

⁷Barna, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1992), p. 21.

⁸All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

⁹These texts do not deny that Christ came “to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28)—these are complementary truths. They do, however, make it an absolute necessity that Christ’s redemptive mission be viewed first as obedience to the command/will of the Father and second as seeking the benefit of mankind. Or, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, the Father determined before the foundation of the world to provide man’s redemption through the work of the Son and Spirit *for the praise of His glory* (1:3–14).

the agenda for ministry, but the Father, who loves the world and seeks its good, sets this agenda. This Christological, and actually Trinitarian, basis for ministry rules out both utilitarianism, which tends to create ministry out of needs, and pragmatism, which transforms ministry into marketing strategy.¹⁰

When market-driven ministries operate with the idea that *people matter to God* as the first, or governing, principle of ministry, they are out of step with Scripture and God's plan. The first principle of ministry is not *people matter to God*; it is *God matters to God*, that is, the pursuit of His own glory is the chief principle that governs the universe. God's glory matters more to God than the good of people—what else accounts for the awful reality of hell and the eternal consequences of falling short of God's glory?¹¹ The center of Scripture and history is doxological, not soteriological. John Piper powerfully captures this idea,

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.¹²

This God-centered perspective, versus the man-centered one, is a fundamental requirement of pleasing God *and* benefiting people. "If the pursuit of *God's* glory is not ordered above the pursuit of *man's* good in the affections of the heart and the priorities of the church, *man* will not be well served and *God* will not be duly honored."¹³ The very strategy adopted in marketing runs counter to its proposed ultimate goal. The pursuit of self's perceived needs is at the core of man's flight from God, and it is poor handling of Scripture to cast God in the role of Cosmic Need-Meeter. The driving force of redemption is not meeting needs, it is to magnify God's grace (Eph 2:7). "God's first love is rooted in the value of his holy name, not the value of sinful people. And because it is, there is hope for sinful people—since they are not the ground of their

¹⁰Ray S. Anderson, "A Theology of Ministry" in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 8–9.

¹¹Not surprisingly, the man-centeredness of contemporary evangelical thinking has begun to yield "modifications" of understanding about the doctrine of eternal punishment. Robert A. Petersen provides a solid rebuttal to the contemporary rejection of the biblical doctrine (*Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995]).

¹²John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), p. 11.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 12.

salvation, God's name is."¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards made this same argument in his day,

Here God acting for *himself*, or making himself his last end, and his acting for *their* sake, are not to be set in opposition; they are rather to be considered as coinciding one with the other, and implied one in the other. But yet God is to be considered first and original in his regard; and the creature is the object of God's regard, consequently, and by implication, as being as it were comprehended in God.¹⁵

The Confidence About Ministry in the Marketing Orientation Is Man-Centered

Because marketing is an entrepreneurial skill honed in the pursuit of corporate success, self-confidence is woven into its fabric. Entrepreneurs are inclined to pride themselves in the wisdom of their plans and the effectiveness of their efforts. While this spirit is unacceptable for believers in the marketplace, it is absolutely intolerable in ministry. Yet, the philosophical bent of marketing is that church growth is as simple as designing a good marketing strategy. Again, Barna serves as the example: "If you study your market, devise intelligent plans, and implement those plans faithfully, you should have an increase in the numbers of visitors, new members, and people who accept Christ as their Savior."¹⁶ Os Guinness recounts the brazen self-confidence of some in the marketing movement,

One Christian advertising agent, who both represented Coca-Cola Corporation and engineered the "I Found It" evangelistic campaign, paraded his golden calf brazenly: "Back in Jerusalem where the church started, God performed a miracle there on the day of Pentecost. They didn't have the benefits of buttons and media, so God had to do a little supernatural work there. But today, with our technology, we have available to us the opportunity to create the same kind of interest in a secular society." Put simply, another church growth consultant claims, "five to ten million baby boomers would be back in the fold within a month" if churches adopted three simple changes: 1. "Advertise" 2. Let people know the "product benefits" 3. Be "nice to new people."¹⁷

¹⁴John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1991), p. 108.

¹⁵*Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols., rev. and ed. Edward Hickman (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:101.

¹⁶Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 34.

¹⁷*Dining with the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 38.

The sheer audacity of such claims ought to alert one to deeper theological problems with a movement which is so confident in its ability to generate success. It is much too easy for marketing churches to give lip service to prayer and dependence on God while, in fact, trusting the marketing techniques.¹⁸ Rick Warren, a highly recognized and influential leader of the church growth and marketing movements, makes the incredible claim, "Anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart."¹⁹ While statements like this may serve well as motivation to adopt ministry based on felt needs, one cannot ignore the serious errors embodied in this false confidence.

First, the biblical picture of man's lost condition is much more serious than Warren's optimism allows. God describes unbelievers as people who are dead in sin (Eph 2:1), excluded from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart (Eph 4:18), hostile toward God (Rom 8:7), not able to receive spiritual things because they consider them to be foolish (1 Cor 2:14), held captive by the devil to do his will (2 Tim 2:26), and blinded by the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4). It seems impossible to mesh these biblical descriptions of the unbeliever with the marketing movement's picture of the typical baby boomer or baby buster who is eagerly seeking God, certain to find Him if the church will only market itself properly. Typical of this shallow view of depravity is Chris Seay's assessment of baby busters, "It's not that we don't trust God; it's that we don't trust the institutions. They've let us down. But I don't think Busters have rejected Christ."²⁰ The marketing movement's failure to grapple with the biblical data about the depth of man's depravity renders it incapable of genuinely confronting the idolatry of contemporary unbelievers. This will have disastrous eternal implications. This weakened view of depravity easily results in "evangelism" which makes a Churched Harry out of an Unchurched Harry, but does it make a Converted Harry?

Second, the practical result of placing so much stock in marketing technique is an enormous burden of responsibility to find and meet the right needs. If, as Warren asserts, "anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart," then the church bears an immense responsibility for "key finding." This view of evangelism is not found in

¹⁸Craig Parro, "Church Growth's Two Faces," *Christianity Today*, 24 June 1991, p. 19.

¹⁹*The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 220.

²⁰Charles Trueheart, "Welcome to the Next Church," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1996): 52.

the New Testament.²¹ The core of evangelism in Scripture is the gospel message itself, not how the gospel is packaged or tailored to felt needs. In fact, Paul acknowledged the difficulty he faced in ministry precisely because he would not adjust his message to the audience (2 Cor 2:15–17; cf. 1 Cor 1:18–2:5). His assurance in the face of the incredible challenge to win people to Christ ought to be our assurance as well, namely “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor 3:5).

There seems to be a correlation between the man-centered confidence of the marketing movement and the tendency to de-emphasize preaching and emphasize forms of drama. Drama is perceived to be an effective means of getting “behind the defense mechanisms” of the unchurched.²² While it is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the legitimacy of using drama in worship or evangelism, the reason urged by its advocates in the marketing movement (getting behind defense mechanisms) reveals its dependence upon technique(s). This man-centered reliance on technique shifts to their shoulders that which is properly the work of the Spirit (cf. John 16:8–11; 1 Cor 2:1–5). Ed Dobson parrots the same argument with regard to music:

We wanted a musical style that would elicit a response. Unchurched people come to a service hesitantly. Their mind-set is “you’re not going to get me.” Their defenses are up. We felt that a style of music that would get them moving in a physical way (nodding heads and tapping feet) would help break down their defenses.²³

This is precisely the type of argument that Paul would have rejected categorically. We must stop trusting in our ingenuity and begin to trust once again in the power of God in the gospel. We should have every confidence that it is fully sufficient and capable of “constantly bearing fruit and increasing” (Col 1:6).

The Evangelistic Strategy of a Marketing Orientation Is Man-Centered

The marketing movement’s man-centeredness is also reflected in its focus on the felt needs of the unchurched or unbeliever. Marketing, in

²¹The common texts used in defense of this position, 1 Cor 9:18–23 and Acts 17:22–31, were shown in my previous article not to support this conclusion (see footnote 1).

²²Cf. Jim Dethmer, “Who is Your Church Called to Reach?” (*The Pastor’s Update* [Pasadena, CA: Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, 1991] audio tape, vol. 27) and Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 183, 185–186.

²³*Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 42–43.

the commercial realm, is built on the perceived needs of the customer.²⁴ Ministry marketing is built on the same foundation. Barna writes, "This is what marketing the Church is all about: providing our product (relationships) as a solution to people's felt need."²⁵ Though true biblical evangelism does meet the ultimate need of a lost person (eternal life), the felt-need evangelism advocated by the marketing movement establishes an agenda which places the felt needs of unbelievers in the place of top priority. This means that man and his perceived needs take center stage. This is clearly not the biblical perspective. Michael Horton appropriately comments,

Jesus insists that we be chiefly concerned with the glory of God and the holiness of His name and only secondarily concerned about our own needs, whether real or felt. This is a priority we must get right and a priority which, I fear, the church growth movement has gotten wrong in its insistence that the primary purpose of the church is to meet the "felt needs" of the unchurched, rather than to teach and lead the unchurched to recognize their greatest priority to be worshipping the one true God and believing His Word.²⁶

The felt needs strategy of the marketing movement is deficient on at least two counts.

Evangelism Built on Felt Needs Undercuts the Authority of the Gospel Message

The marketing axiom that "the audience, not the message, is sovereign"²⁷ inherently surrenders the dogmatism which the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ demand. There is grave danger in marketing because the gospel is presented as a *potential solution* or *option* that the customer should consider. Marketing cannot take a stance of authority and remain consistent with its fundamental premises. Marketing sets out to induce voluntary exchanges by offering the customer what he or she wants. Rather than deplore this capitulation to man's autonomy and self-centeredness, marketing advocates exult in it. Leith Anderson's comment is representative,

Words like "ought," "should," and "must" punctuated the older style in which the preacher told the audience what to do. The new style explains

²⁴James F. Engel, Martin R. Warshaw, and Thomas C. Kinnear, *Promotional Strategy*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: Irwin, 1991) pp. 129–131.

²⁵*Marketing the Church*, p. 51.

²⁶Michael S. Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), pp. 188–189.

²⁷*Marketing the Church*, p. 145.

the issues, presents the alternatives, and then seeks to persuade—but clearly leaves the decision up to the listener. Modern Americans don't want their politicians, doctors, or pastors telling them what to do. They want to be well informed and decide for themselves.²⁸

Bypassing the incredibly simplistic dichotomy (the old style said “must” while the new style “persuades”), one must wonder what generation of Adam's children *ever* wanted pastors to tell them what to do? Yet did the early church adopt a style of evangelism which merely laid out possible alternatives, or did they take a stance of authority which called people to repentance? The marketing orientation leaves little room for Paul's bold claim that “God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent because he has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:30b–31a).²⁹

A more subtle, but no less tragic, erosion of biblical authority creeps in through the market-sensitive delivery of the message. Preaching within the marketing framework, it is claimed, ought to begin with the unchurched person's felt need, offer practical solutions, *then* show that these solutions are found in the Bible. It is inappropriate and ineffective to declare “Thus saith the Lord” since the audience does not accept the Bible as authoritative.³⁰ Lee Strobel claims to exemplify this pattern.

Here's what happened to me as a seeker. As I would listen to a series of messages on how to improve my marriage, I would conclude that the scriptural guidelines for marriage made sense. Of course, the reason they made sense is because they're from God. But *even though I wasn't ready to accept that premise*, I was still willing to try implementing the biblical principles simply because they sounded so reasonable. And when I began treating my wife in a biblical way, guess what happened? Our marriage improved!

As I began applying biblical wisdom to the way I dealt with my anger, I found my emotions getting under control. When I started practicing forgiveness the way the Bible prescribes, my bitterness eased. And as this happened again and again in areas of finances, relationships, and character qualities, it was building a case for the reliability of Scripture.

My ultimate conclusion that the Bible is God's inspired Word was the result not only of checking out its historical reliability but also of personally experiencing its ability to positively change my life, *even though I*

²⁸Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992), p. 209.

²⁹Interestingly enough, this text is the conclusion of Paul's so-called “market-sensitive” sermon at Mars Hill. This fact, in addition to the ones cited in the first part of this series (“Market-Driven Ministry: Blessing or Curse?” *DBSJ* 1 [Spring 1996]: 82–83), should demonstrate the fallacy of basing marketing principles on Acts 17.

³⁰Jim Dethmer, “Who Is Your Church Called to Reach?” audio tape.

wasn't yet a Christian (emphasis added).³¹

While this seems innocent enough, the actual outworking of this approach evidences a further betrayal of the biblical doctrine of depravity. This is an unfortunate example of allowing experience to determine theology rather than interpreting experience by theology. God never grants man permission to sit in judgment on His Word. Man, by virtue of depravity, is incapable of doing so (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4). Certainty that the Bible is God's authoritative Word does not come through verification of its historical reliability, much less through the changes that take place in an unbeliever's life, but by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:4–5, 14; 1 John 2:20, 27). Erickson is correct in asserting that the problem “is not merely that natural man is unwilling to accept the gifts and wisdom of God, but that, without the help of the Holy Spirit, natural man is unable to understand them.”³² One of the underlying premises of the marketing movement seems to be the pernicious belief that the unchurched are nearer to salvation than the Bible teaches. Charles Haddon Spurgeon confronted this problem in his own day, “There are some who seem to think that the sinner takes certain steps towards God before God comes to him; but it is not so. The sinner is dead, and life must come to him from God ere he can stir from the grave, or even have a wish to stir therefrom.”³³

By starting with the felt needs of the audience the marketing movement also runs the risk of minimizing the offense of the gospel. Lee Strobel argues that “The most effective messages for seekers are those that address their felt needs. Unchurched Harry and Mary want to know if a book that's centuries old can really give them practical assistance in the trenches of their daily lives.”³⁴ This preoccupation with immediate satisfaction of felt needs plunders the true significance of the gospel—eternal redemption. By shifting the focus of the Christian message away from the true purpose for Christ's death, to save us from God's wrath (Rom 5:9,10; 1 John 4:10), the crucial issue of man's sin and guilt are minimized. Doug Murren writes, “Though unchurched boomers may privately acknowledge they are flawed—and maybe even sinful—they are hardly going to sit in a public place and listen to themselves being described as worms, wretches, fallen creatures and

³¹*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, p. 214.

³²Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 248.

³³“Non Nobis, Domine!” A sermon delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on Thursday evening, May 16th, 1878 (in *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], 9:222–223).

³⁴*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, pp. 213–214.

other totally depraved types.”³⁵ But this is exactly the “bad news” which makes the gospel “good news.” Paul began the body of his letter to the Romans, which has the gospel as its theme, with the words, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom 1:18). This is where the gospel must always begin. MacArthur is correct to argue, “Preaching that downplays God’s wrath does not enhance evangelism; it undermines it.”³⁶ The marketing movement’s toned-down message reflects an anemic view of depravity.

Sadly, their methodology, shifting the focus of the gospel to immediate felt needs, actually defeats their intention of reaching people for Christ. When the sharp edges of the biblical teaching on depravity are dulled in order to gain converts, the opposite effect is realized. Iain Murray concluded that the early success of the Great Awakening could be attributed to a deliberate concentration by the principal preachers upon the seriousness of sin.

They judged that the fundamental need of their contemporaries was to understand the meaning of being a true Christian and, further, they were convinced that the absence of this understanding was to be attributed chiefly to a defective view of sin. It had become assumed that men could be savingly related to Christ without any prior conviction about the sin which made their salvation necessary.³⁷

The quest for user friendly, felt-need oriented sermons cannot yield such in-depth, searching biblical preaching as that which was used by God to ignite the Great Awakening. The marketing mood is out of harmony with the very call of the gospel. One writer expressed his concern poignantly,

In marketing, the consumer ultimately defines the product. And thus a marketing-driven church will be sorely tempted to compromise its message, both in content and tone. Marketing solicits, woos, and entertains. But the gospel confronts; it calls to repentance and commitment. There is a judgment to be avoided, a hell to be fled, and thoughts to be taken captive.³⁸

Evangelism Built on Felt Needs Undermines the Content of the Gospel Message

Despite protests to the contrary, the marketing movement’s obses-

³⁵*The Baby Boomerang* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), pp. 214–215.

³⁶John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), p. 65.

³⁷Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 125.

³⁸Parro, “Church Growth’s Two Faces,” p. 19.

sion with the felt needs of the unchurched undermines the content of the gospel in two ways.

The pre-eminence of felt needs distorts the genuine significance of the gospel. Rather than being proclaimed primarily as the answer for mankind's ultimate concern—death,³⁹ the gospel is presented as the answer to life's problems, the needs "felt" by the unbeliever. Aldrich has argued that this change is needed because the increasing pluralism of our times has yielded a culture which lacks knowledge of the Christian faith, assumptions and terms.⁴⁰ The methodological assumption is that unless you present the gospel in ways attractive to the hearer, they will not accept the message. For instance, Aldrich argues,

The gospel is then tailor-made to his individual needs. The goal is to discover that point in the individual's life at which the gospel will become good news, and then share it as such.... Jesus met a person at his point of need. We should, too. If his need is in the area of marriage, God has good news for him. If he is struggling with guilt, God has good news for him. Likewise God has good news for the person who needs love and affection, security or esteem.⁴¹

The attraction of the gospel, in this method, becomes a temporal solution to life's problems, whether real or perceived, rather than the hope of eternal life. This method falters in that it not only minimizes a significant purpose of the gospel, to destroy death,⁴² it also adopts a pattern which runs counter to the apostolic pattern. The apostle Paul refused to redefine or recast the gospel according to the dictates of his audience (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–25). The Corinthians apparently believed that presenting the gospel in ways that "fit" their culture would be more effective than the offensiveness of a crucified Messiah. But what they

³⁹The primary meaning of death in Scripture is separation. Physical death is the separation of the material and immaterial parts of man (Heb 9:27). Spiritual death is the separation of the person from the life of God (Eph 4:18). Eternal death is the separation of the entire person, both body and soul, from God in a place of eternal, conscious punishment (Rev 20:15).

⁴⁰Joseph Aldrich, *Lifestyle Evangelism* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1981), p. 86. This is probably an accurate assessment of our culture, but it is an unwarranted conclusion because: (1) the culture of the early church, and countless others, also fit this description, yet fruitful evangelism abounded without concentrating on felt needs; and (2) this approach, as Aldrich admits (p. 89), is essentially pre-evangelism, i.e., it actually presents general biblical principles about some life-related subject, not the formal gospel message which is "the power of God unto salvation to every one who believes" (Romans 1:16).

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

⁴²Cf. Heb 2:14–15; 1 Cor 15:20–26.

failed to consider, and here the marketing movement falters as well, is that God deliberately chose an offensive message so that He might magnify His own glory. God does not call us to do public relations work for Him; He calls us to proclaim the message of the Cross accurately and authoritatively. Horton sums up the problem well,

If we succeed in making the gospel appealing to sinners on the basis of satisfying their consumer appetites, we have not succeeded at all. If unbelievers do not find Christianity offensive (that is, for the right reasons), there is something wrong with our presentation. The Great Commission was a command to make disciples, not to establish franchises for consumers.⁴³

This method also argues that the gospel must be tailored to the felt needs of modern hearers in order for them to understand it properly. Since the contemporary unbeliever does not believe in hell, then the gospel is irrelevant if it is presented as salvation from hell. A pastor in the Detroit area challenged the “old style” of evangelism with this mock gospel exchange,

“You’re going to die and go to hell.” They’re going to go, “I don’t even believe in hell.” “Well, you’re going to die and go there anyway.” I mean, what’s that going to do? Why don’t you talk about, “Is your marriage strong?” “Well, no. My marriage is falling apart.” “Guess what, Jesus can make your marriage a transformed marriage.”⁴⁴

One major problem with recasting the gospel like this is that it actually offers something that the gospel does not offer.⁴⁵ The biblical truth is that the gospel may not be “good news” for the new convert’s marriage (cf. 1 Cor 7:15) or family problems (cf. Matt 10:21, 34–36; Luke 12:53). In seeking to accommodate the gospel to a pagan world view, the gospel is actually being distorted and disconnected from its true significance. We must not forget to recognize that the gospel is a trust to be guarded (2 Tim 1:13–14) and a stewardship that requires faithfulness (1 Cor 4:1–2). This means the contemporary church must be more concerned about content than conversions (1 Thess 2:3–5; 2 Cor 2:17), our responsibility than our results (Acts 20:26–27; cf. Matt 23:37,38; Acts 17:32,34), and, that our confidence should be in God’s power through

⁴³Michael Scott Horton, *Made in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), p. 65.

⁴⁴Brad Powell, “Temple’s Vision and Values: A Culturally Relevant Church” sermon cassette tape (Detroit: Temple Baptist Church, 1995).

⁴⁵This is clearly evident from the absence of any gospel offers in the New Testament related to solving life circumstances such as marital problems, financial difficulties, etc. The categories with which the gospel is offered are categories such as sin (expiation), wrath (propitiation), alienation from the life of God (reconciliation), and death (eternal life).

His Word rather than our persuasiveness (2 Cor 4:1–7; 1 Cor 2:1–5).

Using felt needs in this way introduces another significant theological weakness. Assuming that unbelievers must already accept certain basic Christian assumptions before they can be evangelized, as Aldrich and Powell argue, disregards the New Testament teaching on the noetic effects of sin⁴⁶ and the absolute need for the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit at the point of conversion that enables man to see that the foolishness of the Cross is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18, 22–24). The marketing movement is reviving the Corinthian error that Paul so strongly rebuked, namely, since people do not accept the biblical categories of the gospel message, we should restate it in new categories that are more comprehensible and compatible to modern thinking. What was wrong, and ineffective, in the first century remains so at the close of the twentieth century.

The contemporary focus on felt needs undermines the content of the gospel of by accommodating, rather than confronting, the spirit of the age. Douglas Webster poses the proper questions,

The profile of the target audience shapes the mood and method of the market-driven church, calling for consumer sensitivity, practical, relational teaching and an optimistic belief in the future. A critical question for the market-sensitive church is whether insight into the mind and culture of the baby boomer generation leads to a prophetic penetration of this market niche with the gospel or promotes a culturally compatible affirmation of the gospel. Does the gospel of the market-driven church redeem the lost or reinforce trends, deliver from sin or affirm self, reconcile people to God or appeal to religious consumers?⁴⁷

Doug Murren clearly illustrates the problem when he argues on behalf of baby boomers,

We are interested in a God who is vitally interested in and concerned about our daily lives. For inwardly we think such thoughts as: There may be eternal life, but right now, Monday through Friday is enough eternity for me. Have Christ and Church make sense to our world, and we'll be back. Until then, forget it!⁴⁸

This sort of accommodation, rather than lift it out of its rebellious spirit of autonomy, actually panders to man's sinful self-centeredness. Any at

⁴⁶I.e., that sin affects the mind of man so that he is unable to understand and accept the truth of God for it is foolish to him (cf. 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 4:17–18).

⁴⁷Douglas Webster, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 66.

⁴⁸*The Baby Boomerang*, p. 96.

tempt at biblical ministry which allows the hearer's temporal preoccupations⁴⁹ to dictate the content of the message distorts the content of the gospel message.

Within this felt need framework, the transcendence of the gospel is lost. Rather than being a message with an eternal focus and temporal implications, it becomes a message with temporal focus and eternal implications. The theme of the felt-need message seems to be, "You get all this (a good marriage, good self-esteem, etc.) *and heaven too!*" The message of the Scriptures is inverse to this, namely, you have been saved from wrath, *therefore live like it!* The real question is, Did Jesus Christ die on the Cross to save us from bad marriages and poor self-esteem, or did He die to save us from the eternal consequences of our rebellion against God? The answer is obvious.

When the transcendent elements of the gospel are de-emphasized in favor of felt needs, it leads to distortion in the message. The ultimate issue at stake in the gospel, the removal of sin and restoration of fellowship with God through Jesus Christ,⁵⁰ becomes obscured. A gospel message tailored to felt needs will not address the true needs that Scripture identifies. George Barna establishes a false set of options when he writes, "We are well prepared to fulfill those needs—not the needs we claim people have, but the needs that people themselves recognize and express."⁵¹ The question is not, "What needs do the unchurched feel?" Nor is it, "What needs to we think the unchurched do or should have?" The real issue is, "What needs does God through His Word say that the unbeliever has?"

The true needs of the unbeliever, clearly identified in Scripture, all relate to the unbeliever's standing before God. Unbelievers need removal of the sin which alienates them from God (Col 1:21); they need a new birth by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5; Titus 3:5); and they need to fear the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matt 10:28). By their own admission, unbelievers do not consider these matters felt needs; subsequently, the marketer has no room in his message for such subjects. Guinness, in noting this, writes,

⁴⁹The point is that all real (vs. felt) needs have eternal significance, even if they are bound up in such matters as marital problems, stewardship of finances, etc. Due to their eternal significance they should be addressed from the perspective of eternity, i.e. God's perspective, not from the perspective of "Monday through Friday" as Murren suggests. The consistent call of Scripture to believer and non-believer is that "the now" takes its significance ultimately in relation to the day when we will give account of ourselves to God, not how we have coped in this world (cf. Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:9–10).

⁵⁰Cf. Col 1:19–23; 2 Cor 5:18–19; Rom 3:21–26; 5:8–11.

⁵¹*Marketing the Church*, p. 37.

As a result, when megachurch pastors seek to mold a message to their “market” of constituent needs their preaching omits key components. Gone are the hard sayings of Jesus. Gone is the teaching on sin, self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, judgment, hell. With all its need-meeting emphases, there is little in the church-growth movement that stands crosswise to the world.⁵²

It is not surprising then to find observers of the marketing movement taking note that references to sin and hell are conspicuously absent from the sermons of market-driven churches. MacArthur cites a string of such observations collected from newspapers and magazines chronicling the integration of marketing technique into church ministry:

There is no fire and brimstone here. No Bible-thumping. Just practical, witty messages.

Services...have an informal feeling. You won't hear people threatened with hell or referred to as sinners. The goal is to make them feel welcome, not drive them away.

As with all clergyman [this pastor's] answer is God—but he slips Him in at the end, and even then he doesn't get heavy. No ranting, no raving. No fire, no brimstone. He doesn't even use the H-word. Call it Light Gospel. It has the same salvation as the Old Time Religion, but with a third less guilt.

The sermons are relevant, upbeat, and best of all, short. You won't hear a lot of preaching about sin and damnation and hell fire. Preaching here doesn't sound like *preaching*. It is sophisticated, urbane, friendly talk. It breaks all the stereotypes.

[The pastor] is preaching a very upbeat message.... It's a salvationist message, but the idea is not so much being saved from the fires of hell. Rather, it's being saved from meaninglessness and aimlessness in this life. It's more of a soft sell.

The idea, [the pastor] says, is to get people through the front doors, then disprove the stereotype of the sweating, loosened necktied, Bible-thumping preacher who yells and screams about burning in hell for eternity.⁵³

While most would rightly want to avoid the negative caricatures presented in these observations, the proper answer is to change the quirky mannerisms of the preacher, not the content of the gospel. Unfortunately, in its desire to earn the ear of a sinful world, the marketing movement is changing the content of the gospel by replacing its so

⁵²*Dining with the Devil*, p. 78.

⁵³*Ashamed of the Gospel*, p. 47.

teriological components (e.g., sin, death, hell, atonement, repentance) with psychological ones (self-esteem, recovery, healing, marital happiness, etc.). This is clearly a distortion of the gospel message.

The ultimate cost of this man-centered emphasis on felt needs could be very high. As Michael Horton rightly observes,

If we are going to win our contemporaries, it will not be by trying to convince them that Christianity is more practical than, for example, New Age mysticism; it will not, in other words, be through demonstrating that the Christian faith answers the unbeliever's quest for something that works better than other self-improvement programs, but that Christianity starts with fundamentally different questions.⁵⁴

THE PRAGMATISM OF THE MARKETING MOVEMENT IS FLAWED

Formally, pragmatism is a system of thinking which evaluates "ideas for their practical consequences instead of their conformity to an ideal truth."⁵⁵ Functionally, pragmatism seems not to be concerned with truth at all, only what is practically effective, what works. The church growth movement, with its wholehearted endorsement of marketing philosophy and practice, is riddled with a pragmatic mindset. Gene Getz agrees,

My main concern personally is that most church-growth writers do not start with biblical study and exposition to support their positions. Rather they start with "what works" and then attempt to integrate scriptural support into their pragmatic system. This often results in a nebulous perspective on what the Bible actually teaches about the church.⁵⁶

The root of this pragmatic bent seems to be the introduction of the business paradigm for ministry. Barna's argument is that the local church "is a business.... For the local church to be a successful business, it must impact a growing share of its market area."⁵⁷ The pragmatism of the marketing movement evidences itself in at least three ways.

⁵⁴*Made In America*, p. 55.

⁵⁵Ronald J. VanderMolen, "Pragmatism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 864.

⁵⁶*Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1984), pp. 22–23. Bill Hull sees the problem as even more far-reaching, "Today there is a dangerous groveling at this altar of pragmatism within the evangelical church. Working models are useful; in fact, we must have them, but we must offer them only after the principles are developed, and they must be based upon those principles" (*Can We Save the Evangelical Church?* [Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993], p. 33.).

⁵⁷Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 14.

It Is Pragmatic in Its Determination of Success

Pragmatism is very bottom-line oriented; if it produces the desired results, it is judged to be good. Peter Wagner, a recognized church-growth champion, plainly admits this pragmatic bent,

The Church Growth Movement has always stressed pragmatism, and still does even though many have criticized it. It is not the kind of pragmatism that comprises [*sic*] doctrine or ethics or the kind that dehumanizes people by using them as means toward an end. It is, however, the kind of consecrated pragmatism which ruthlessly examines traditional methodologies and programs asking the tough questions. If some sort of ministry in the church is not reaching intended goals, consecrated pragmatism says there is something wrong which needs to be corrected.⁵⁸

The “consecration” of this pragmatism is very suspect. Certainly, ministry needs to be evaluated just as any other endeavor. But the business paradigm of the marketing movement establishes terms and conditions for evaluation which focus almost exclusively on increasing the “profit margin” of ministry. Its preoccupation with results, most often equated with growth in numbers, opens it to at least three major criticisms.

First, this pragmatic view of success is flawed because it is built on an assumption of predictability, that is, numerical success is predictable when appropriate means are employed. The argument is straightforward: Success is attained quite naturally by the proper use of effective means. Find the right means and you can guarantee success. Although he died over a century before the marketing movement, Finney’s theology is the seed-bed for this view of ministry. He wrote,

There is one fact under the government of God worthy of universal notice and of everlasting remembrance; which is, that the most useful and important things are most easily and certainly obtained by the use of the appropriate means.... I fully believe that, could facts be known, it would be found that when the appointed means have been *rightly* used, spiritual blessings have been obtained with greater uniformity than temporal ones.⁵⁹

The assumed predictability of results is the bedrock of pragmatic assessments of success, but one must question whether it is proper to argue for “uniformity” of spiritual blessings associated with proper use of appropriate means. The subtle, but undeniable, shift which results from this

⁵⁸C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), p. 201.

⁵⁹Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1910), p. 6.

thinking is that the success is attributed to the means *rather than God*.⁶⁰ However, both Scripture and history demonstrate that the same means do not always yield the same results. The ministries of our Lord and the Apostle Paul clearly met with varying results in different locales (cf. Luke 4:15 vis-à-vis 4:28; Acts 13:48–49 vis-à-vis 17:32–34).

From a historical perspective, Iain Murray notes that the variations in God's outpouring of grace was one of the main arguments that Jonathan Edwards used to emphasize God's sovereignty during the Great Awakening. Edwards and his like-minded friends "asserted that the revival was a glorious manifestation of the sovereignty of divine grace: the large number of converts of varying ages and backgrounds, the contrast of response between one place and another, the differing results attending the same sermons—all these they traced back to God himself."⁶¹

The pragmatist's claim of predictability in results is not only without foundation biblically and historically, but it always yields a view of the ministry which amounts to a production quota. Since growth is the result of utilizing effective means, lack of growth is the fault of those responsible to use those means. As noted above, Charles Finney, in the nineteenth century, introduced this thinking into the pursuit of evangelism and revival. One, among many, of the damaging results of this shift in theology and methodology was the division it produced in churches. Since Finney taught that "all faithful men were able to secure revivals, only one conclusion could be drawn on preachers who failed to do so."⁶²

The marketing movement has taken pains to avoid this second-guessing of pastoral spirituality, but it has merely replaced Finney's "new measures" with contemporary managerial and marketing skills. They

⁶⁰Finney does at one point concede that the means will not produce results if God does not bless them (*Revivals of Religion*, p. 5), but even this concession is marred by a flawed analogy from the laws of agriculture. The analogy is flawed because it ignores the difference between the operation of God in producing crops and saving people, namely that the growth of a crop is a providential work of God, whereas the new birth is a miraculous work of God (John 3:5–8; Titus 3:5). This error is indicative of Finney's defective views regarding the depravity of man (cf. Gerald L. Priest, "Revival and Revivalism: A Historical and Doctrinal Evaluation," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Fall 1996): 245–46).

⁶¹Jonathan Edwards, p. 212.

⁶²Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), p. 264. While most of the division in churches was the result, as is often the case, of Finney's over-zealous followers, there is historical evidence that he also engaged in divisive tactics "for the sake of revival." Murray cites a personal letter from Finney, dated 7 May 1829, in which he suggests that if the current pastor "can be peaceably and quietly disposed of this church may yet be made the centre of revival operation" (p. 264).

concede that there are “hundreds of dedicated pastors whose churches are not growing. They are faithful to God’s Word, they pray earnestly and consistently, they preach solid messages, and their dedication is unquestioned—but still their churches refuse to grow.”⁶³ What, then, is the problem? “It takes more than dedication to lead a church to grow; it takes *skill*.”⁶⁴ So the clog to church growth in the *newest* set of “new measures” is the skills of the pastor.

Whether old or new, both systems end up dependent upon man, not God. The bottom-line is that the only thing that stands between an evangelist and a new convert is the proper use of means, and the only obstacle between a pastor and church growth is the right use of means. And, who is responsible to use the proper means? Man. The cracked theological foundation of the marketing movement inevitably reveals itself in methodologies that guarantee “success” and then idolize those who achieve it.

A second criticism, arising from the first, of this pragmatic bent toward numerically defined success is that it produces an evaluation of ministry which makes man accountable for both the activity and results of evangelism. Rick Warren makes this plain,

God wants your church to be *both* faithful and fruitful. One without the other is only half the equation. Numerical results are no justification for being unfaithful to the message, but neither can we use faithfulness as an excuse for being ineffective! Churches that have few or no conversions often attempt to justify their ineffectiveness with the statement, “God has not called us to be successful. He has just called us to be faithful.” I strongly disagree because the Bible clearly teaches that God expects both.

The sticking point is how you define the terms *successful* and *faithful*. I define *successful* as fulfilling the Great Commission. Jesus has given the church a job to do. We will either succeed or fail at it. Using this definition, every church should want to be successful! What is the alternative? The opposite of success is not faithfulness, but *failure*. Any church that is not obeying the Great Commission is failing its purpose, no matter what else it does.⁶⁵

Warren’s zeal to expose the shallowness of making excuses for not obeying the Great Commission is applaudable, but his argument is faulty. By using the words obeying and fulfilling interchangeably, he intermingles human (obeying) and divine responsibilities (fulfilling) so that we are failures if God chooses not to give fruit.⁶⁶ Warren’s own

⁶³*The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 56.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶⁵*The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 64.

⁶⁶Some counter this by arguing that God would not choose to withhold fruit, but there are clear biblical examples where He did (cf. Isa 6:9–10; Matt 11:20–24).

words confirm this assessment. Using the parable of the talents to define the meaning of faithful, he concludes, "He was called 'wicked and lazy' in contrast to the two men called 'faithful' for producing results. The point of the story is clear: God expects to see results. Our faithfulness is demonstrated by our fruit."⁶⁷

This position is out of step with God's pattern for ministry, namely that we labor and He gives the results (cf. 1 Cor 3:6–7). Ignoring this crucial distinction produces a grossly distorted view of our task. J. I. Packer shows how failing to grasp it leads to serious problems,

If we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize. And this line of thought, consistently followed through, will lead us far astray.

Let us work this out. If we regarded it as our job, not simply to present Christ, but actually to produce converts—to evangelize, not only faithfully, but also successfully—our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating. We should conclude that our basic equipment, both for personal dealing and public preaching, must be twofold. We must have, not merely a clear grasp of the meaning and application of the gospel, but also an irresistible technique for inducing a response...we should evaluate all evangelism, our own and other people's, by the criterion, not only of the message preached, but also of the visible results. If our own efforts were not bearing fruit, we should conclude that our technique still needed improving. If they were bearing fruit, we should conclude that this justified the technique we had been using.⁶⁸

The New Testament concept of faithfulness concentrates on the stewardship of the gospel message (1 Cor 4:2; 2 Tim 1:13–14). Fruit-bearing is the product of the Spirit in and from the life of the believer (Gal 5:22–23; John 15:5–8). While every believer ought to earnestly desire to bear fruit for the Lord's glory and should be eagerly obeying God's commands that lead to fruit-bearing, the actual results are owing to the

⁶⁷*The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 65. Sadly, this argument is not restricted to regions beyond fundamentalism. John R. Rice promoted this same view. He wrote, "We often hear people say that the man who wins few souls is just as faithful as the man who wins many. But that is not the teaching of the Bible." He was even willing to take this view of ministry to its logical conclusion—"Who is the greatest in the sight of the Lord? Evidently the man who wins more souls" (*I Am a Fundamentalist* [Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1975], p. 246).

⁶⁸James I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), pp. 27–28.

power and plan of God, not man. And, if this is so, the pragmatic tendency to determine success by results is wrong.

A third criticism is that the marketing movement's pragmatism leads to the terrible mistake of assuming that growth is automatically the evidence of God's blessing or endorsement. Os Guinness recounts how "one Florida pastor with a seven-thousand-member megachurch expressed the fallacy well: 'I must be doing right or things wouldn't be going so well.'"⁶⁹ Such naiveté is seldom expressed so bluntly, yet its presence is abundant. Consider these words written by W. A. Criswell as an introduction for a church growth book which endorses marketing principles,

Saddleback Valley Community Church is recognized as the fastest growing Baptist church in the *history* of America. It averages over 10,000 people in worship attendance each week on a beautiful, spacious seventy-four-acre campus. This is sufficient evidence that Rick Warren knows whereof he speaks.⁷⁰

The implication seems clear, church growth (success) provides evidence of God's blessing, therefore it lends endorsement to those involved in it. But is this the proper way to assess the work of the local church and its pastors? David Wells offers a contrasting viewpoint,

It may be that it is only our enthusiasm for pragmatism—our assumption that only the consequences of an idea reveal whether it is true or false—that incline us to think that anything that succeeds in the marketplace must, in the nature of the case, be true and virtuous. In fact, I would argue that if Christian assumptions are to be allowed to have their place, we cannot assume that success in the cultural market is necessarily an indication of the presence of truth and virtue. Such success might just as easily be a sign that the church has been willing to prostitute itself by seeking worldly accommodation.⁷¹

A major problem which confronts the marketing movement is that its self-justification has been largely from experience, not Scripture. The core of its experiential argument is that it is successful, and its success is understood as divine approval and endorsement. This is not a new phenomenon. Jonathan Edwards considered this type of pragmatic argument one of the errors of the Great Awakening that needed to be confronted. Apparently, some were defending their wrong spirit and actions because of God's blessings poured out during the revival. His words still serve as a timely reminder,

⁶⁹*Dining with the Devil*, p. 38.

⁷⁰*The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 11.

⁷¹David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 68.

Another error, arising from an erroneous principle, is a wrong notion that they have an attestation of Divine Providence to persons, or things. We go too far, when we look upon the success that God gives to some persons, in making them instruments of doing much good, as a testimony of God's approbation of those persons and all the courses they take...But there are innumerable ways by which persons may be misled, in forming a judgment of the mind and will of God, from the events of providence. If a person's success be a reward of something in him that God approves, yet it is no argument that he approves of everything in him.⁷²

One of Edwards' main concerns was that both opponents and promoters of the revival were not distinguishing between the good and bad present in it. The two camps either wholly rejected it or wholly embraced it; positions which, to Edwards, ignored the biblical fact that most movements of the Spirit, because they are done through and among sinners, are not unmixed blessings. It seems that our present day is guilty of missing this point also. The oft-parroted dictum, "God does not use dirty vessels," is representative of this wrong thinking. It is wrong because: (1) ultimately, God uses nothing but dirty vessels since we are all sinners; (2) the Scriptures present many examples where "dirty vessels" are used by God to accomplish His purposes—Balaam, Jonah, Judas; and, the point of concern at stake here, (3) it tends to push us toward accepting every movement that accomplishes good things.

Consider the dangerous flow of this logic: "Since churches are growing and people are being saved through the use of marketing techniques, it must be evidence of God's blessing. God only blesses those who obey Him, therefore the marketing movement must be biblically acceptable." This was precisely the type of argument that Edwards rejected, and so should we. It is flawed because it can result, on one hand, in an unwarranted cause-effect conclusion (church marketing is blessed because it pleases God) or, on the other hand, a denial of the obvious (that some churches are growing and people are being saved). Edwards labored to call the people of his day to see that providence (bestowal of blessing) cannot serve as an adequate rule for judgment in these matters. What then was Edwards's proposed standard?

The dispensations and events of providence, with their reasons, are too little understood by us, to be as our rule, instead of God's word;...therefore we cannot safely take the events of his providence as a revelation of his mind concerning a person's conduct and behavior; we have no warrant so to do. God has never appointed those things to be our rule. We have but

⁷²Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:408–409.

one rule to go by, and that is his holy word...It is to be feared that some have been greatly confirmed and emboldened, by the great success that God has given them, in some things that have been really contrary to the rules of God's holy word...

Nor do I think that they go upon sure ground, who conclude they have not been in an error in their conduct, because at the time of their doing a thing for which they have been blamed and reproached by others, they were favoured with special comforts of the God's Spirit. God's bestowing special mercies on a person, is no sign that he approves of every thing he sees in him at that time.⁷³

This practice, seeking to determine God's mind by the presence of blessing or catastrophe, is an age-old error⁷⁴ that should be abandoned. Success in the marketplace cannot be the standard of evaluation. It is too subjective in definition and is hard pressed to demonstrate clear cause-effect connections; indeed, the success may actually be the product of disobedience.⁷⁵ The test of our ministries must always be obedience to the Scriptures, for "if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules" (2 Tim 2:5).

It Is Pragmatic in Its Selection of Methods

Building upon its preoccupation with visible success, pragmatism also shows itself in the selection of methods. Again, Wagner's viewpoint is unmistakably clear,

We ought to see clearly that the end *does* justify the means. What else possibly could justify the means? If the method I am using accomplishes the goal I am aiming at, it is for that reason a good method. If, on the other hand, my method is not accomplishing the goal, how can I be justified in continuing to use it?⁷⁶

Rick Warren adds to the counsel, "Never criticize any method that God is blessing!"⁷⁷ Warren may be using hyperbole, yet the lack of dis-

⁷³Ibid., p. 409.

⁷⁴This was the error of Job's friends (cf. God's rebuke for them, Job 42:7-9), the disciples' response to the man born blind (John 9:1ff), and, it seems, those who reported to Christ the events surrounding the death of certain Galileans (Luke 13:1-5).

⁷⁵This seems to be a concern the apostle Paul expressed to Timothy—"the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2 Tim 4:3).

⁷⁶Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976), p. 161.

⁷⁷*The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 156. It bears saying that many marketing and church growth advocates are quick to turn away from or criticize methods which they

cernment evident in these two statements is frightening. While neither man is probably attempting to make an ethical statement, what they fail to realize is that pragmatism, by its nature, takes on ethical proportions.

Given their fundamental assumption that pleasing God demands success which generates church growth, one can understand why they are motivated to be so generous about the selection of methods. Once a man-centered goal for ministry (evangelism) has been adopted, the only criterion for evaluation becomes the numbers of people evangelized. The flaws of this approach were addressed above, but it is necessary in this regard to point out that a God-centered philosophy of ministry is the only antidote for this problem. When the ultimate concern of ministry is doxological rather than soteriological or anthropological, then everything in that ministry must be brought under the authority of God's truth.

Honoring God's Word and will is more important than success; therefore, all methods are to be analyzed according to that standard, not a pragmatic one. One wonders how God's judgment of Uzzah (2 Sam 6:6–7) fits into a scheme like Wagner's? Uzzah saved the ark—a method that actually worked toward a good end—but God poured out His wrath because it was a method that violated His Word. Moses, too, achieved a “good end” in getting water from the rock (Num 20:11), yet God considered his method worthy of condemnation, not reward. Apparently, the test of a good method, from God's perspective, cannot be reduced simply to accomplishing the goal. It must also be obedient to God's Word.⁷⁸

The marketing orientation, because it intentionally places the demands of the target market in the place of priority, of necessity operates with a distorted evaluation of what is proper to do in ministry. The Lordship of Jesus Christ as revealed through the Bible falls into second place behind the needs and desires of the sovereign consumer. Webster highlights the problem,

Anything goes as long as it is defended for the sake of evangelism or promotes church growth. The single most decisive support for new methods is popularity. If people are buying, the product must be good. Public opinion

deem to be no longer effective. Perhaps no better snapshot of this can be found than the simple advertising lead of a brochure for a 1993 conference put on by the Leadership Network—“When the horse is dead, dismount” (John Seel, *The Evangelical Forfeit* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], p. 71).

⁷⁸One might add that, particularly in the case of Moses, obedience is so critical because it is the evidence of faith (cf. Num 20:12–13 “Because you have not believed Me”). What better test of our faith than to remain faithful to His Word so that only His power can accomplish the task (cf. 1 Cor 1:17–2:5).

has become an arbiter of truth, dictating the terms of acceptability according to the marketplace. The sovereignty of the audience makes serious, prayerful thinking about the will of God unnecessary, because opinions are formed on the basis of taste and preferences rather than careful biblical conviction and thoughtful theological reflection. Americans easily become “slaves of slogans” when discernment is reduced to ratings.⁷⁹

The grave danger in all man-centered systems, and the marketing approach is only one of many, is that theology is dislocated from its proper place at the center of church life (cf. 1 Tim 3:15) and ministry technique takes its place.⁸⁰ The contemporary shift among evangelicals and fundamentalists toward a more professionalized, and supposedly practical, ministry training is both evidence of and a contributor to this problem. As the controlling, central role of doctrine is minimized, effective methods become the central concern. But this very process, the watering down of doctrinal concerns, leaves pragmatism as the only means the church can use to determine effectiveness. Having set aside its God-given compass, the church is quickly getting lost in the wilderness of secular solutions to church-growth problems.

It Is Pragmatic in Its Interaction with Culture

Pragmatism, as noted above, is a system that judges ideas by their consequences rather than according to any system of thought or belief about truth. The marketing movement plants itself firmly within this mindset when it addresses matters of culture. By culture, I use the term in the same manner that David Wells suggests,

to signify the set of values, the network of beliefs that are institutionalized in a people's collective life and that govern their behavior. Culture, then, is the outward discipline in which inherited meanings and morality, beliefs and ways of behaving are preserved. It is that collectively assumed scheme of understanding that defines both what is normal and what meanings we should attach to public behavior. It is what reveals eccentrics for their eccentricity, rebels for their rebellion, no-gooders for not doing good...It is what gives us our inner coordinates, the markers beside the trail that, from infancy onward, slowly leads us to civilized life.⁸¹

In asserting that the marketing movement is pragmatic with regard to culture, I mean that it approaches these matters from a completely utilitarian perspective, not from a viewpoint of truth or morality. Rick Warren's instruction regarding music serves as a clear example of my

⁷⁹Douglas Webster, *Selling Jesus*, p. 29.

⁸⁰David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 71.

⁸¹*No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 167.

concerns,

I reject the idea that music styles can be judged as either “good” or “bad” music. Who decides this? The kind of music you like is determined by your background and culture. Certain tones and scales sound pleasant to Asian ears; other tones and scales sound pleasant to Middle Eastern ears. Africans enjoy different rhythms than South Americans.

To insist that all “good” music was written in Europe two hundred years ago is cultural elitism. There certainly isn’t any biblical basis for that view. Depending on where you grew up you may love Kentucky bluegrass, Dixieland jazz, Chicago blues, Milwaukee polka, or Nashville country and western. None of these styles is any “better” music than the other.

Churches also need to admit that no particular *style* of music is “sacred.” What makes a song sacred is its *message*. Music is nothing more than an arrangement of notes and rhythms; it’s the words that make a song spiritual.⁸²

Warren is not alone in this assessment. Doug Murren suggests that one of the pillars of their music philosophy is embodied in the statement, “We believe music—scores, as opposed to lyrics—is amoral (neither moral nor immoral).”⁸³ While music is perhaps the chief evidence of its pragmatic stance on cultural matters, it is hardly limited to this area. The early leaders of Willow Creek Community Church saw what they perceived as cultural isolation to be one the main motivating forces in their efforts to craft a ministry for the Unchurched Harrys and Marys. The isolation was embodied in “The Rules. No drinking, No movies, No dancing, No card playing...No contemporary music.”⁸⁴

The Movement Is Deceived by Cultural Relativism

It is obvious from these statements that the problem runs more deeply than pragmatism, that is, pragmatism in cultural matters is the outworking of a relativistic view of culture. Stated simply, cultural relativism believes that because cultural matters have no absolute moral value, they cannot be considered to be normative. Since they are not normative, they may be treated with indifference. Few people, either secular or religious, doubt that cultural relativism has captured our day. Allan Bloom, a secular university professor laments that our educational system, because of its acceptance of cultural relativism, is driven to teach us the history of men’s prejudices “not to correct the mistakes and really

⁸²*The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 281.

⁸³*The Baby Boomerang*, p. 194.

⁸⁴Barbara Stewart, ed., *Church Leaders Handbook* (South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Community Church, 1991), pp. 26–27.

be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.”⁸⁵

As reflected in Warren’s argument about music, the vast array of cultural differences leads to the conclusion that it is impossible to assert the superiority of any culture—he calls it “cultural elitism.” Bloom speaks eloquently to this type of argument,

The fact that there have been different opinions about good and bad in different times and places in no way proves that none is superior to others.... On the face of it, the difference of opinion would seem to raise the question as to which is true or right than to banish it. The natural reaction is to try to resolve the difference, to examine the claims and reasons for each opinion.⁸⁶

Whether intentional or not, the marketing movement practices a non-thinking, popular form of cultural relativism and multiculturalism. As James Davison Hunter points out, one of the first steps in multiculturalism is to redefine culture so that it no longer refers to norms and values which serve as the “shoulds” and “should nots” of our society. In the multicultural framework, “culture is essentially reduced to life-style (choices about how one lives) or, at best, customs (practices that have the sanction of tradition but are not insisted upon as inviolable) or possibly collective experiences.”⁸⁷ These are precisely the descriptions of culture found in the marketing literature and conferences. In fact, Douglas Webster goes as far as to suggest that “the church marketer’s analysis of culture is so superficial that it is deceptive.”⁸⁸

These ideas clearly form the basis of the quest for cultural relevance. Culture, in the marketing orientation, is merely a life-style factor, not an ethical or moral issue. That is why Murren can refer to their worship philosophy as striving to “be inclusive and intelligible to the baby boomer culture.”⁸⁹ Working from this life-style premise, arguments are marshaled that cultural adaptation is an essential part of communicating the biblical message. For instance, Ed Dobson, defends the idea of a seeker sensitive service that utilizes “culturally relevant” forms by comparing it to the work of missionaries,

We understand this principle when we send missionaries to other countries. These missionaries seek first to learn the language and the culture of the places to which they go. Only then do they attempt to communicate

⁸⁵*The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 26.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁸⁷*Before the Shooting Begins* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), pp. 200–201.

⁸⁸*Selling Jesus*, p. 71.

⁸⁹*The Baby Boomerang*, p. 190.

the gospel.

We would never send an English-speaking missionary to a Spanish-speaking county [*sic*] to minister exclusively in English. That would be irrational, not to mention stupid.⁹⁰

Ignoring the glaring flaws in the analogy,⁹¹ Dobson's use of the term *culture* confirms the fact that it is being used to mean life-style or common experiences. He further confirms this by drawing a comparison between using basketball marathons to reach teenagers and the start of a seeker sensitive service. Again, the argument reveals that culture is viewed in terms of life-style, not as a value system.

It is not a long way from basketball to rock music, drama, and the good news about Jesus Christ. A seeker-sensitive service is an attempt to place the gospel in a culturally relevant context. The language of contemporary music, drama that engages, talks that are relevant, and answers that are honest make up the language of secular America. Just as the gospel was not compromised at a basketball marathon, neither is it compromised in a seeker-sensitive service.⁹²

David Wells has written at great length to demonstrate that this very problem, assuming that culture is merely a matter of life-style versus a matter of moral significance, is causing great harm to the health of evangelicalism. The force of his arguments is compelling,

Evangelicals are antimodern only across a narrow front; I write from a position that is antimodern across the entire front. It is only where assumptions in culture directly and obviously contradict articles of faith that most evangelicals become aroused and rise up to battle "secular humanism"; aside from these specific matters, they tend to view culture as neutral and harmless. More than that, they often view culture as a partner amenable to being coopted in the cause of celebrating Christian truth. I cannot share such naiveté; indeed, I consider it dangerous. Culture is laden with values, many of which work to rearrange the substance of faith.... It is because many evangelicals believe in the innocence of modern culture and for that reason exploit it and are exploited by it that they are unable to believe in all of the truth that once characterized the Protestant orthodoxy.... The

⁹⁰*Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service*, p. 15.

⁹¹There at least two—one logical, one ethical. The logical error is a classic case of comparing apples (language) and oranges (music). A missionary learns the language because it is the necessary component for communication; choices of musical style are not necessary matters of communication. The ethical error is the assumption that cultural adaptation is morally neutral—something we would not agree with if a missionary moves to a cannibalistic society. That is, missionaries do not adopt the native culture wholesale; they must put it to the test of biblical morals.

⁹²Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service*, p. 16.

stream of historic orthodoxy that once watered the evangelical soul is now dammed by a worldliness that many fail to recognize as worldliness because of the cultural innocence with which it presents itself.... We now have less biblical fidelity, less interest in truth, less seriousness, less depth, and less capacity to speak the Word of God to our own generation in a way that offers an alternative to what it already thinks.⁹³

The sting of these words is only exceeded by their perceptiveness. Yet, due to its fundamental principles, the marketing movement is bound to offer the consumer exactly what he or she wants. In some senses, its pragmatic use of cultural marries well to the mindset of the baby boomers, the most commonly chosen target for ministry. Douglas Webster describes the typical baby boomer as, “indoctrinated in this collegiate atmosphere, [they] feel comfortable with cultural relativism (everyone is entitled to his or her opinion) and satisfied with spiritual relationism (inspirational feelings about oneself, others and God).”⁹⁴

This viewpoint cannot stand unchallenged by those who operate within a God-centered world view. Culture is not amoral. Myers speaks well to this issue,

As Christians, we insist that there *are* permanent standards for culture. Culture is the human effort to give structure to life. But human nature does not exist as a law unto itself. Human nature is, as part of God’s creation, a permanent standard. Men and women cannot act against their own nature without violating the standards God has established in their very being. Moreover, the rest of creation, in which culture is established and with which culture must contend, has a divinely established order. Cultural institutions, artifacts, and expressions that deny, suppress, or distort that order ought to be recognized as inferior to those that acknowledge, honor, and enjoy it.⁹⁵

The most important question, however, cannot be answered by the marketing movement because it is one of truth, not pragmatics—Is the use of contemporary cultural forms consistent with the message of the gospel? or, Are those forms so value-laden that they distort the message? Pragmatism can only answer these questions based on the consequences that result from using them. The great danger is that these forms, because of their popularity in our culture, may actually yield positive results *by the marketer’s standard*—an increase in numbers. But this may be a short-term gain which turns to long-term losses. One writer warns of

⁹³*No Place for Truth*, pp. 11–12.

⁹⁴*Selling Jesus*, p. 63.

⁹⁵Kenneth A. Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), p. 30.

this problem,

Worship practices that only evoke good feelings and thereby foster a character that seeks instant gratification might be enormously successful at first, but the costs, though not immediately obvious, may be high. The very methods that attract crowds might also prevent the development of habits of reflection and learning. A focus on self and feelings limits the nurturing of a godly and outreaching character.⁹⁶

The Movement Has Surrendered to Popular Culture

The willingness of the market-driven churches to adopt rock music as the primary tool by which they position their churches in order to be relevant clearly evidences the cultural surrender that results from pragmatic ministry.⁹⁷ This choice is faulty for at least three reasons.

First, it disregards the plain fact that rock music cannot be separated from its cultural context and values. Even a cursory reading of secular and religious writings on the history of rock music and the philosophy which undergirds it reveals that rock music is a culture carrier, not merely a neutral form of cultural expression. For Rick Warren to flatly deny that there is any moral significance to music is either woefully naive or culpably negligent spiritual leadership.⁹⁸ Some Christian analysts of this question acknowledge the significant role of culture in evaluating the use of rock music for ministry. Kenneth Myers calls shallow thinking on this issue into question when he writes,

In assessing rock 'n' roll, for example, it's not enough to read the lyrics and find out on what beat of each measure the accent falls. We also need to

⁹⁶Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) p. 111.

⁹⁷Cf. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 280; Stewart, *Church Leaders Handbook*, p. 21; Murren, *The Baby Boomerang*, p. 189; Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service*, pp. 34–35.

⁹⁸Ironically, one of Warren's arguments for using rock music is its power to impact character. He writes, "Aristotle said, 'Music has the power to shape the character.' Satan is clearly using music to do that today. The rock lyrics of the 1960s and 1970s shaped the values of most Americans who are now in their thirties, forties or fifties... If we don't use contemporary music to spread godly values, Satan will have unchallenged access to an entire generation" (*The Purpose Driven Church*, pp. 279–280). Warren, by using the terms "music" and "lyrics" interchangeably, dodges the question of how a vehicle so powerful for corrupting morals can so easily be transformed into a powerful tool for producing godliness. In so doing, he misrepresents the words of Aristotle—the very quote demonstrates that he disagrees with Warren about the moral neutrality of music. Music (what Warren defines as "an arrangement of notes and rhythms" [p. 281]) clearly communicates moral value by its character (e.g., provocative or sensual music) and associations (i.e., the images or conventions with which is readily identifiable, e.g., striptease music).

consider what relationship rock has with other aspects of pop culture, what social role it plays for its fans, and how it compares with other musical options available to listeners. We need to look at the *culture* of rock, not just the words and music.⁹⁹

Peter Wicke, a sociologist, writes, "Rock music is a mass medium through which cultural values and meanings circulate, through which social experiences are passed on which reach far beyond the material nature of the music."¹⁰⁰ Rock music not only springs from a particular cultural matrix, it helps establish it. The authors of *Dancing in the Dark* help us see this,

While neat dichotomies are dangerous, it is safe to say that for the most part rock and roll features feeling and experience more than thought and analysis; it cares more about identity and intimacy than knowledge and intellect; it celebrates the here and now, focusing on the experiential rather than the ideological...it appeals and functions primarily on broad emotional and attitudinal levels, as psycho-emotional map and mentor for many. In laying out such a generalized, affective map for great numbers of teens, it establishes for teen culture a supportive atmosphere, an ambience with guidelines for acceptable expression and behavior, at least as far as other teens are concerned.... It is a self-contained world in which sensory experience and emotional involvement take precedence over verbal content and rational analysis.¹⁰¹

Contrary to the shallow viewpoint of the marketing advocates, rock music is far more than a life-style choice. It embodies and establishes a culture loaded with meaning and values, and the culture of rock music is antithetical, not neutral, to Christlike living. The fact that it can be embraced within the church for worship purposes is a tell-tale sign of contemporary evangelicalism's inability to sense its own worldliness. At least Richard Quebedeaux recognized what was taking place,

Indeed, rock is inherently a form of music that made its way by outrage against taboo, and there are no taboos left. It is profoundly significant that evangelicals, even the more conservative among them have accepted the rock mode. *The acceptance, obviously, indicates a further chapter in the death*

⁹⁹*All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰*Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology*, trans. Rachel Fogg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. ix.

¹⁰¹Quentin J. Schultze et al., *Dancing in the Dark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pp. 162–163). This observation is perhaps more significant in that the authors, involved in teaching/research for Calvin College, write from a perspective quite distanced from fundamentalism.

*of self-denial and world rejection among them [emphasis added].*¹⁰²

Harold Best sums up well the curious combination of rock, worldliness, and pragmatism,

Our borrowing of rock is evidence of a loosening life-style among evangelicals. We can use anything we want to in witnessing now. That's both a virtue and a vice. We're in this whole pragmatic mishmash that says, If it works, it's good. If it'll bring souls to Jesus, it's good. As far as I'm concerned it's just pietized pragmatism.¹⁰³

Second, and developing from the first, by adopting a stance of moral neutrality on music, the marketing movement ignores the destructive character of rock music. Allan Bloom, cited above for his warning against surrendering to cultural relativism, argues that all music is value-laden. His assessment of the character of rock music ought to jolt those who so quickly embrace it as a ministry vehicle,

This is the significance of rock music. I do not suggest that it has any high intellectual sources. But it has risen to its current heights in the education of the young on the ashes of classical music, and in an atmosphere in which there is no intellectual resistance to attempts to tap the rawest passions...rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored. It acknowledges the first emanations of children's emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimating them...Rock gives children, on a silver platter, with all the public authority of the entertainment industry, everything their parents always used to tell them they had to wait for until they grew up and would understand later.¹⁰⁴

Third, beyond the question of rock's moral worth, the marketing movement fails to question if the musical character of rock music is compatible with the message of the gospel. Many are concluding that it is not. At the heart of this conclusion is the realization that the gospel is a message with content to be believed about a Person to be received. Rock music is inadequate for communicating the content of this message without distortion,

Perhaps the biggest limitation...is the failure to recognize that the primary mode of meaning and expression in rock is not "rational discourse." Among the major artistic media for teens, rock in particular is a non-rational mode of communication, dealing with the sensory and the emotional,

¹⁰²*The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 118.

¹⁰³"Music: Offerings of Creativity," *Christianity Today* 6 May 1977, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴*The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 73.

employing the figurative lyrics, musical mood, and symbolic gestures.¹⁰⁵

Rather than surrendering to the culture for the pragmatic sake of church growth, “Christians can help society recognize the danger of its loss of reasoned discourse in the all-consuming ubiquity of entertainment. By offering worship that educates instead of entertains, that uplifts and transforms through the renewing of the mind (Rom 12:2), the Church can expose the meaninglessness of our present culture.”¹⁰⁶ The gospel message, which is absolute and transcendent, is being tied to cultural forms which contradict it at the core, because they are forms built on the principles of relativism and immediacy.

Kenneth Myers joins this critical assessment of the marriage between popular culture and ministry,

It may have been easier for the Corinthians to eat meat offered to idols than it is for us to enjoy popular culture innocently. Idolatry is so obviously foreign to Christian values that it must be guarded against constantly. Even idolatrous ideas are not too difficult to identify and resist. But a sensibility, a consciousness, is much more evasive and subtle... while critical of some of its content, the church has a virtually uncritical attitude toward the form of popular culture. In fact, the church has adopted those forms without much resistance, in the alleged interest of promoting its message. But the message has thereby suffered, and so have its members.... Popular culture's forms are not capable of sustaining the Christian conviction of a holy, judging God who demands repentance and promises the joy of obedience.¹⁰⁷

Once more we see that the attempt of the marketing movement, due to its capitulation to man-centeredness, yields fruit which is scripturally unacceptable.

CONCLUSION

The marketing mindset, due to its consumer-orientation, yields a pragmatic methodology which is contrary to Scripture. Sadly, a secular publication may have best captured the futility of the marketing movement:

“To give the whole store away to match what this year's market says the unchurched want is to have people who know least about faith determine most about its expression,” warns American church historian Martin E. Marty. The mainline denominations may be dying because they lost their

¹⁰⁵Schultze, *Dancing in the Dark*, p. 162.

¹⁰⁶Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁷*All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, pp. 181–182.

theological integrity. The only thing worse, perhaps, would be the rise of a new Protestant establishment that succeeds because it never had any.¹⁰⁸

In a day where man is being made the measure of all things, we need to return to the God-centered focus of Scripture which energized the early church and every period of revival in the history of the church. If we truly desire to honor God, then we must trust Him enough to do His work in His way, depending on the Spirit as we obey and proclaim His Word.

¹⁰⁸Kenneth L. Woodward, "Dead End for the Mainline?" *Newsweek*, 9 August 1993, p. 48.