

Biblical and Theological Issues Of Church Marketing

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Introduction

A researcher in Switzerland, long the bastion of watchmaking excellence and profits, discovered a way to use the vibrating frequency of a piece of quartz crystal to keep incredibly accurate time. When presented to the decision makers of the company, they looked hard for all of the familiar components of past success.

“Of what is the main spring made?” they queried. “Where are the twenty-three jeweled parts that have set the world’s time-keeping standard?” “Where is the stem to wind the watch or to adjust its time?”

This new watch did not fit their rigid expectations of what a watch should be, so they rejected it as an idea that would never catch on.

After the Japanese started mass producing the very watch the Swiss rejected, Swiss market share dropped from near 80% to 10%. The inability to view the world as it could be instead of as it always has been was indeed costly.¹

How do you view the world? Are you one who believes that past success is all the reason needed to proceed without change? Or are you more inclined to view the world as it may become as the result of new and creative thinking?

The inability of the evangelical church to view the world as it

could become has been costly indeed. For here we are not dealing with inanimate watches, but with the souls and the spiritual vitality of precious people. The propensity to ponder and protect our precious past has, in many cases, disqualified us from meeting the needs of people today.

Our message is timeless and unchanging, it is true. But it is time for the average church to lay aside those methods and traditions that are dear to only a handful, and stride boldly ahead, to meet the needs of the masses.

Jesus Christ would never have given us such a Great Commission if he did not expect that fulfillment was possible. The commission encompasses *all nations*. We would, perhaps, be more comfortable had Jesus said, "Go as far as you can and do the best you can using the resources at hand until I come."

But that is not what He said. He said you and I are responsible for developing and implementing a strategy, based on *his provision* and *our creativity*, that will fulfill the goal He set before us.²

After ten years of careful research, I am convinced that *marketing* the church to increase first time attenders is part of the creative strategy which Jesus Christ wants us to use as we reach out for Him both today and into the future.

Yet, even as I make that assertion, I realize that these are fighting words to a significant percentage of the conservative, evangelical community. Today, there is a fire storm of controversy engulfing the whole question of whether or not it is biblical and theologically sound to market the church of Jesus Christ in culturally relevant ways.

This article will both define and answer that question. In fact, it will demonstrate that biblical, theologically orthodox Christians are not only *allowed* to market the church, but they *must* do so if they are to carry out their scriptural mandate.

The Reason For Attracting Church Visitors

The foundational reason for attracting church visitors is found in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All au-

thority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”³

Similar exhortations are recorded by the other gospel writers as well as the exhortation to witness recorded by Luke in Acts 1:8. In Acts 8, the disciples were spread beyond Jerusalem, preaching the gospel and planting churches. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Barnabas established and built up numerous new churches in the Gentile world.

Paul and Silas revisited many of the churches they had established finding that the churches “were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily” (Acts 16:5).

The entire thrust of the Scriptures is focused on attracting people into a proper relationship with God. John Stott describes that attracting nature of God when he states,

The living God of the Bible is a sending God, which is what “mission” means. He sent the prophets to Israel. He sent His Son into the world. His Son sent out the apostles, and the seventy, and the church. He also sent the Spirit to the church and sends Him into our hearts today. So the mission of the church arises from the mission of God and is to be modeled on it. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus said, “even so send I you.” (John 20:21)⁴

Today, the church is the primary agent for attracting and equipping people to become disciples of Jesus Christ (Acts 2).

The Controversy Over The Ethics Of Church Marketing

In many ways, living the successful Christian life comes down to a question of balance. Today, many evangelical churches are missing that balance when it comes to the issue of effectively marketing the church.

On the one hand, some reactionary, culturally conservative

churches seem determined to force themselves into obscurity and eventual death by refusing to address our contemporary culture on its own terms. To them, one's spirituality can be accurately gauged by the size of one's King James Bible and the degree to which one is willing to sanctify the culture which was dominant in the churches of the 1940s and 1950s.

This obscurantist approach is characterized by a martyr complex which implies that if a church is growing, it must be compromising God's word somewhere. *Anti-pragmatism* and its resulting failure are equated with true spirituality.

Such churches remind me of a comment made by a little girl who went fishing with her father. Early one morning, as they approached the river bank near their favorite fishing spot, another angler hooked and landed a snapping turtle. The fisherman then proceeded to behead the turtle as the man and his daughter looked on.

Later that day when the father and daughter were returning to their car, the girl noticed that the headless turtle was still writhing in the sand. Turning to her father, she said: "Daddy, that turtle is dead. He just doesn't know it yet!"

On the other hand, many baby boomers within evangelical churches have uncritically embraced *pragmatism* with an imbalanced passion. What is true and morally right is automatically reduced to that which works. According to this line of reasoning, if it works, it is consistent with God's word. Success is equated with God's blessing. The increase of nickels and noses is the only real value in such "ministries."

Unlike the dead, anti-pragmatic churches, many of these churches, where the medium has become the message, are exploding with numerical growth. But, at what cost? As Jesus said: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?"

I believe that somewhere between the two erroneous ministry models, which I have just described, is a biblical balance. I further believe that the key to finding that balance is the ability to differentiate between *message* and *methodology*. Our biblical message can never change. Yet our methodology must con-

stantly be changing to bring the good news of the gospel to the cutting edge of our culture.

Paul affirmed the unchangeableness of our message in his epistle to the Romans when he said: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

He further explained that our methodology must be constantly undergoing dynamic change when he wrote these revolutionary words to the Corinthians:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow-partaker of it.⁵

If we are to be effective in reaching our contemporary society with the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ, then our methodology must constantly be changing. For as Frank Tillipough says: "There is no normative methodology taught in the New Testament."

Marketing, Pragmatism, And Situation Ethics

In October of 1989, I took a doctoral course from Dr. Robert Saucy entitled "Contemporary Theological Issues Facing The Church."

This class informed, impacted, and moderated my whole approach to marketing in a most unexpected way. Dr. Saucy began the class by launching a frontal assault upon contemporary, evangelical pragmatism in general and the marketing of ministry in particular. In fact, Saucy went so far as to say that the prag-

matic marketing which is beginning to be embraced by contemporary evangelicals is nothing more than situation ethics.⁶

Then, in November of 1991, I read John MacArthur's book, *Our Sufficiency In Christ*. In this polemical work, MacArthur identifies *pragmatism* as one of the three deadly influences which are undermining the spiritual lives of many contemporary, evangelical Christians.

MacArthur's urgent concern may be best summarized using his own words:

Many assume that without some gimmick, the gospel message just won't reach people, and unless we accommodate it to the fashion of our day, we can't hope for it to be effective.⁷

The error of pragmatism is that it regards methodologies that "work" as more important and more viable than those that are biblical. A pragmatist is concerned primarily with whether a given practice is expedient, not necessarily with whether it is in harmony with Scripture. He starts with the question, "What do the unchurched want?" and builds his strategy from there, rather than asking the question, "What does Scripture teach about church ministry?" and following a biblical pattern.⁸

Churches have turned to merchandising schemes and entertainment media in an effort to appeal to people. Simply preaching the Word is out. That's too confrontive, and the unvarnished gospel is too offensive. Bible exposition is deemed distasteful.⁹

Better to charm people first, then slip the gospel in subtly. Churches that have bought this misguided philosophy believe they must provide entertainment and good feelings rather than profound truth and deep experiences of worship, prayer, and conviction. Any pastor who follows that pattern and fails to preach the Word is prostituting the ministry.¹⁰

Pragmatism

Quite frankly, Saucy's and MacArthur's frontal assaults upon pragmatism and marketing hit a raw nerve with me. Yet, after I got over my defensiveness and impatience with their *impractical*, idealistic perspective, I gave serious thought to their concerns. Further study and thought has led me to understand that part of Saucy's and MacArthur's concerns are well founded.

Webster's Dictionary defines pragmatism as follows:

A doctrine which tests truth by its practical consequences. Truth is therefore held to be relative and not attainable by metaphysical speculation. Pragmatism was first formulated by C.S. Peirce (1839 - 1914) and was developed by William James, John Dewey and others.¹¹

The American Heritage Dictionary defines pragmatism as: "The theory...that the meaning of a proposition or course of action lies in its observable consequences, and that the sum of these consequences constitutes its meaning."

Previously, as a self proclaimed pragmatist, I had never really given much thought to either the meaning or the implications of unqualified pragmatism. Based upon the preceding definitions, it would be fair to say that an *uncritical* use of pragmatism does in fact result in situation ethics, just as Saucy and MacArthur contend.

Situation Ethics

Joseph Fletcher in his famous book, *Moral Responsibility: Situation Ethics At Work*, encouraged his readers to shake loose of an infantile dependence on laws and systems of morality. Instead, one should decide moral issues situationally and learn to "sin bravely." According to Fletcher, that is the only way we can live as free men. "Thou shalt not commit adultery—ordinarily." "Thou shalt not steal—usually." "Thou shalt not covet—generally." It all depends on what is *practical* in a given situation.

Joseph Fletcher went so far as to say that agape love is the key to right action even though that action per se is sinful.

Lying could be more Christian than telling the truth.

Stealing could be better than respecting private property. No action is good or right in itself. It depends on whether it hurts or helps people, whether or not it serves love's purpose—understanding love to be personal concern—in the situation.¹²

Many responded to the new ethic with great enthusiasm. Harvey Cox attributed Fletcher's acceptance to "the simple fact that Americans as a whole are better educated and they reflect this added sophistication in their ethical and religious attitudes."

Marketing As Situation Ethics

Quite frankly, I now partially agree with Robert Saucy's assertion that Joseph Fletcher's creed has simply been repackaged in some of the pragmatic marketing that is currently being used by evangelical pastors, churches and institutions. It is usually presented under the headings of "Church Growth," "Church Management," or "Church Marketing."

In another one of his books entitled *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, Joseph Fletcher clearly states his position. Here it is in a capsule. Notice how similar these concepts are to those which seem to be currently dominating much of the discussion within the evangelical movement.

First he discusses three approaches to ethics. At one extreme is the approach of legalism, which he identifies as any system that gets its authority from a rule book, like the Bible. At the opposite extreme is antinomianism which has no rules, like libertinism, Moral Rearmament Movement, and existentialism. But right in the middle (and thus presumably the best by its balanced position!) is situationalism. It is not, he insists, existential, because it uses our heritage, moral judgment, and love as guidelines.

Second, he states some presuppositions of his position, using philosophical terms. He says that situation ethics involves *pragmatism* (because it lets the present situation guide); *relativism* (because according to Fletcher, one must never say never or always or perfect or absolute); *positivism* (because at its heart is the positive declaration, which cannot be proved, that love is the

key category for conduct); and personalism (because people, not things, are of primary importance).

Third, (and this is the heart of his creed), he states the propositions which serve as principles to guide situational, ethical conduct. They are these.

1. Love is the only thing that is intrinsically good. (This is agape love.)
2. The ruling norm for Christian decision is love.
3. Love and justice are the same, because justice is love using its head.
4. Love is not necessarily liking, for love wills the neighbor's good whether we like him or not. Thus love is impartial.
5. Only the end justifies the means; nothing else. Of course, the end is love, but he argues that a loving end justifies any means.¹³

Summary

To sum up, my interaction with Dr. Robert Saucy and my reading of MacArthur's *Our Sufficiency In Christ* have caused me to closely examine and refine my pragmatic approach to marketing the church. I find that, as they charge, some of it is an application of situation ethics. Therefore, I cannot *uncritically* use this methodology.

Several Critical Critiques Of Marketing

Robert Saucy's Critique of Pragmatic Marketing

Dr. Saucy charges that a basic problem with pragmatic, church marketing is that it requires one to be omniscient to consistently choose the right end. Only God is omniscient. Therefore, we should only follow the means of His choosing to seek good ends.¹⁴

A second problem with pragmatic, church marketing is that it does not give proper place to a living God who has spoken and who acts in history concerning the affairs of men. "God has clearly spoken concerning both *means* and *ends*." Our calling is

not to be successful by worldly standards, but to be faithful to God's standard. Our ultimate objective must be to obediently glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31).¹⁵

Thirdly, fallen, selfish, human beings are not capable of consistently choosing the truly loving thing. Only by submitting to God's objective truth standard (2 Timothy 3:16) and the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) can fallen human beings consistently choose the truly loving thing. Because pragmatic, church marketing ignores these, it is a dangerous form of both situation ethics and existentialism.¹⁶

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.¹⁷

A Rebuttal To Saucy's Critique

Robert Saucy offers some valuable insights to anyone who wishes to think biblically concerning church marketing. Certainly his concerns should be considered if one is committed to a biblical balance in this area of ministry. I am in agreement with him to the extent that I believe that an *uncritical* approach to church marketing *can* result in the practice of a situational ethic. In contrast to him, I do not believe that it will *always* have that result.

Further, I greatly appreciate his critique of pragmatism as it relates to church marketing. I only disagree with one of his assertions. Yet, that one issue is probably the watershed issue for those who choose between a promarketing or antimarketing approach.

Saucy contends that "God has clearly spoken concerning both *means* and *ends*." Consequently, both the means and the ends should remain unchanged.

As an example of evil marketing that had infiltrated his own local church, Saucy pointed out that members of his congregation were being encouraged to park in the most visible parking lot. The idea was to communicate to the community that his church was a dynamic, living body.¹⁸

Apparently, the fact that this was a new means, not specifically authorized in the New Testament, was the reason for Saucy's rejection. I could not disagree with him more on this point.

I believe that God has clearly spoken concerning *ends* but that He allows for great flexibility (within biblical limits) in the choice of means. Frank Tillipough says: "There is no normative methodology taught in the New Testament." Paul says it this way: "...I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some."

Therefore, I strongly affirm my commitment to new ways of marketing the church to today's culture of the 1990s.

Marketing As Showtime Religion

Another strident critic of church marketing whom I highly respect is John MacArthur, Jr. I think that an article of his which viciously attacks church marketing deserves careful consideration and requires a rebutting response.

The article is entitled "Gimme That Showtime Religion." Here are a few key excerpts which seem to effectively indict all church marketing.

Can the church fight apathy and materialism by feeding people's appetite for entertainment? Evidently many in the church believe the answer is yes, as church after church jumps on the show-business bandwagon. It is a troubling trend that is luring many otherwise orthodox churches away from biblical priorities.¹⁹

Church buildings are being constructed like theaters. Instead of a pulpit, the focus is a stage. Some feature massive platforms that revolve or rise and fall, with colored lights and huge sound boards. Pastors are giving way to media specialists, programming consultants, stage directors, special effects experts, and choreographers.²⁰

The idea is to give the audience what they want. Tailor the church service to whatever will draw a crowd. As a

result pastors are more like politicians than shepherds, looking to appeal to the public rather than leading and building the flock God gave them.²¹

The congregation is served a slick, professional show, where drama, pop music, and maybe a soft-sell sermon constitute the worship service. But the emphasis isn't on worship. It's on entertainment.²²

Underlying this trend is the notion that the church must sell the gospel to unbelievers. Churches thus compete for the consumer on the same level as Frosted Flakes or Miller Lite. More and more churches are relying on *marketing* strategy to sell the church.²³

That philosophy is the result of bad theology...Moreover, this whole Madison-Avenue corruption of Christianity presumes that church services are primarily for recruiting unbelievers.²⁴

Some will maintain that if biblical principles are presented, the medium doesn't matter. That is nonsense.²⁵

I do believe we can be innovative and creative in how we present the gospel, but we have to be careful to harmonize our methods with the profound spiritual truth we are trying to convey. It is too easy to trivialize the sacred message.²⁶

A Response To Marketing As Showtime Religion

Quite frankly, I believe that the strong warning which John MacArthur, Jr. gives contains elements which can help churches find a biblical balance in their approaches to marketing. We must always guard against changing the ministry medium in such a way that the message is adulterated or compromised.

Yet, I believe that MacArthur's reactionary piece throws the baby out with the bath water! He seems to sanctify the culture and marketing approaches of the 1940s and 1950s.

I say that because the illustrations which he puts forward to

prove the folly of contemporary, church marketing demonstrate that MacArthur has not yet learned to effectively differentiate between *message* and *methodology*, between *form* and *function*.

Therefore, he erroneously identifies all church marketing as moral compromise in his scathing indictment. All who dare to offend his cultural sensitivities by changing forms or methodology are the object of John's righteous indignation.

Unfortunately, this broad brush approach of condemnation not only confronts those who have compromised the changeless biblical message, but it also attacks those who choose to use contemporary methods of communicating that changeless message.

Consequently, I believe that it is fair to say that John MacArthur, Jr. falls into the error of cultural conservatism to which I have already alluded and responded in my preceding section called "The Controversy Over The Ethics Of Church Marketing."

MacArthur maintains that forms and methodology for edifying God's saints should be as fixed as the function itself. I reject that assertion.

Only the function should remain the same today. I say that because, the ways in which we can most effectively edify saints today are significantly different from the ones which were effective fifty years ago.

At a recent church leadership seminar, Dr. Haddon Robinson made an impassioned plea for pastors to understand our times and to change their approaches to communication and marketing accordingly. His words offer a reasoned rebuttal to MacArthur's argument.

We live in a day where communication is dominated by television. It is a post-literate age. We are now an oral, musical, visual culture. The use of the narrative story is primary.

Gone is the world of Greco-Roman rhetoric (proposition and 3 arguments). People in our culture know nothing of the Bible, don't take church seriously, and are anti-moral. We must be mission-minded, not professional.

The hardest thing to change is what has worked before!²⁷

To Robinson's statement, I would simply add this observation from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

During this challenging era of dynamic, unprecedented change, may God's people creatively present (market) the gospel in increasingly effective ways.

Using Proof Texts To Bash Marketing

When the more enlightened arguments of scholarly men such as Robert Saucy and John MacArthur, Jr. fail to carry the day, some proponents of their 1940s style cultural chauvinism passionately resort to biblical proof texts in an effort to discredit marketing emotionally rather than *rationally*. Several examples of frequently cited proof texts follow.

Romans 1:16

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone that believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Implicit in the use of this verse is the charge that those who intentionally use church marketing techniques are somehow "ashamed of the gospel" and they do not really believe that "it is the power of God for salvation." Rather, they are accused of believing that marketing is now "the power of God for salvation."

2 Corinthians 1:12

"For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you."

Here, church marketing is identified as "fleshly wisdom," the unconscionable opposite of "holiness and godly sincerity."

2 Corinthians 2:17

"For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as

from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.”

Church marketing is defined as “peddling the word of God.” As such, it cannot be “from God.”

2 Corinthians 4:2

“But we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.”

The cultural traditionalists use this verse to imply that church marketing is a shameful, crafty thing because it always adulterates the word of God.

Galatians 1:6-9

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.²⁸

This text is used to define church marketing as a “different gospel.” Further, those who use marketing techniques are seen as clearly distorting “the gospel of Christ.” Consequently, they are under the curse of God.

1 Thessalonians 2:4-6a

“But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know...nor did we seek glory from men...”

With this text, the critics of church marketing characterize those who engage in it as self-glorifying, flattering, man-pleasers

rather than those who seek to please God from pure hearts.

A Response To The Proof Texts

Proof Texting Is Valid

My initial response to this impressive list of proof texts which are frequently cited in an attempt to bash marketing is to *affirm* them! These inerrant words from God offer a powerful warning and a correcting balance to any church leader who would uncritically use secular marketing methodologies and *messages* in an attempt to win worldly approval.

In fact, in principle, I don't even fault the process of proof texting to establish a theological point. Dr. Bernard Ramm in *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* sums up my position well.

The use of proof texts is perfectly legitimate. Both liberalism and neo-orthodoxy have strongly castigated the orthodox use of proof texts, and not with good reason. There is no doubt that the Scriptures quoted closely yield the doctrines of orthodoxy, not liberalism nor neo-orthodoxy. Neither liberalism nor neo-orthodoxy can hold their positions if held to a strict citation of Scripture.²⁹

Well then, perhaps the critics of all church marketing are right after all. I think not! Here are several reasons why I think they are wrong.

The Misuse of Proof Texts

A favorite instructor of mine was fond of saying: "A text without a *context* is a *pretext*." Those who use proof texts to reject all church marketing out of hand fall into this trap. As Ramm puts it: "The theologian must use his proof texts with proper understanding of his procedure."

Again, Dr. Ramm makes these insightful observations:

There is no doubt that the proof text method is capable of serious malpractice. The mere listing of proof texts is of no value unless each verse is underwritten by sound exegetical work. It is disconcerting to discover how many

verses set down in a book of theology to prove a point melt away when each is examined rather vigorously from the standpoint of exegesis. Not only does it appear that many verses are used that have no relevance but frequently a verse is used whose meaning is actually very different from the one intended by the inspired writer.³⁰

It is almost instinctive with conservatives to grant a point in theology if a proof text is given. Sometimes the array of texts to prove a point is rather imposing. But there must be a sound exegetical examination of every text cited or else we are guilty of superficial treatment of Scripture. The use of proof texts is only as good as the exegesis undergirding their citation. No theologian has a right merely to list verses in proof of a doctrine unless in his own research he has done the requisite exegetical work.³¹

John Calvin said it this way: "It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say."

In my view, those who use proof texts to reject all church marketing in an a priori way fall precisely into the error which both Ramm and Calvin describe. Specifically, they erroneously assume that all church marketing is by definition dishonest, manipulative, distorting and self-serving. They then use passages which condemn those attributes to attack all church marketing. This is what philosophers would describe as a classic, "straw man" argument.

2 Corinthians 2:17

Take 2 Corinthians 2:17, for instance. This proof text is perhaps the strongest verse for those who reject church marketing. It says: "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God."

The key to this strong indictment is in the obvious equation of "peddling the word of God" with church marketing.

However, an examination of the word “peddling” reveals that it does not mean “marketing” per se. Rather, it is a reference to the unscrupulous marketing practices of a “huckster.” It involves “corrupting” or “adulterating” God’s word in such a way that it is cheapened, watered down or diluted.³²

As a strong proponent of church marketing, I also condemn such practices. Rightly understood, 2 Corinthians 2:17 condemns unethical abuses of church marketing which are dishonest, insincere, morally evil or done with a wrong motive. In addition, the thrust of the verse is to condemn those who change the biblical *message*, not those who use innovative, effective *methods*.

The Biblical Validity Of Using Marketing To Attract Visitors

The Apostle Paul states the importance of using proper marketing methods in order to attract people to the changeless biblical message. “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be *careful* how he builds upon it...” The word *careful* means “to see, perceive, express earnest contemplation.”

On the basis of this verse, I would suggest that serious consideration should be given both to the changeless, biblical message and to the changing marketing methodologies which will most effectively attract people to Christ’s church. One marketing method will not always be the best one in attracting people.

From his study on the parable of the soils in Matthew 13, Peter Wagner concludes that churches should focus their outreach to where the soil is really fertile. The right location, proper methods and needed resources should be used in soil which will bear the most fruit. This is not to say that all should abandon the barren soil, but proper strategy and priority should be carefully considered.³³

Marketing the church to increase first time attenders is simply an application of the truths found in Matthew 13. For, marketing first identifies the fertile soil and then it plants the seed of the Word at the most opportune time in the most effective way.

Today, there is a strong emphasis in many evangelical churches upon the fact that church services are primarily for the worship of God and the edification of the saints. Christians are told that they should scatter outside the church walls to do the work of evangelism as they become involved in the lives of people and function as the salt and light of the world. While there is much validity in this approach, the Bible also teaches that there is a place for marketing the church to attract visitors with the goal of enfolded them into the body.

First Corinthians 14:23-26 describes the unbeliever who enters into the church service, observes the congregation functioning as a spiritually gifted body of Christ, and becomes a Christian. Jim Peterson elaborates on the effectiveness of marketing the church to prospective visitors by pointing out that God never intended evangelism to be an individualistic effort. The biblical pattern is for the individual witness to be carried on within the setting of a corporate effort. The corporate witness says, "Look at all of us. This is what you too can become. There's hope." It's possible to discount or explain away an isolated individual, but it's impossible to refute the corporate testimony. The apostle John observed. "No one has even seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us" (I John 4:12)³⁴

The point could be made that marketing the church to attract visitors is actually *more* biblical than using the individual, isolated evangelism approach which seems to be in vogue in many churches.

First of all, as a visitor is attracted to the corporate life of the church, he is exposed to the supernatural unity of believers. In John 17:23, Jesus said: I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me.

Secondly, the visitor is exposed to the supernatural love of one Christian for another. Jesus said in John 13:34-35:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one

another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

Furthermore, by carefully studying the early outreach efforts found in the book of Acts, one can observe that the outreach of the first century church was concentrated on the “God-fearers.” These were people who feared God but had not become circumcised. They were, in fact, the religiously oriented people. They were often found in the synagogues when Paul preached there. Today, we would call them “hot prospects.”

Therefore, the marketing approach which identifies and targets receptive people whether they be called “God-fearers” or “hot prospects” in order to increase church visitors is a *biblical* practice which goes all the way back to the first century church.

The prospective church visitor of today is often religiously oriented, but not fully committed. He is open to considering spiritual matters. Often, such a person is waiting for someone who speaks his cultural language to address his spiritual concerns.

Church marketing seeks to identify such people and to reach out to them with a winsome, culturally relevant invitation. What could be more biblical?

Some object to church marketing because they point out that such efforts invariably attract visitors who are already Christians and members of another church.

Yet, as Christians move from one community to another, they need to find a new church. Marketing assists this process. Also, some churches should be left if they become unbiblical in their approach. Again, these people should be enfolded into a new, biblical church.

There are also many who simply are moderately connected to a church that neither feeds nor folds them in an effective way. If those Christians could profit more at another church, perhaps they should change. Though most pastors feel they should avoid stealing folded Christians, perhaps there is some truth to Donald McGavran’s suggestion:

When a prospect says, “I belong to another church,” he

ought to be asked in as kindly a way as possible, "Are you a practicing Christian?" If the answer to these questions are not satisfactory, he (a sheep running wild on the range) ought to be found and folded, fed and transformed.

If this is sheep stealing, let us steal boldly!³⁵

Marketing As Effective Communication

In the final analysis marketing the church to increase the number of visitors involves finding new ways to effectively communicate the good news about eternal life in Jesus Christ. As Gene Getz points out, even the first century church used a wide variety of methods to communicate the gospel.³⁶

- a. The disciples taught. *Didasko* is one of the most common terms referring to communication between a teacher and pupil with the content determined by the situation. It is used, for example, by the Apostles in their communication of the gospel. (Acts 4:2; 5:21-28, 41; 28:30, 31)³⁷
- b. They proclaimed or preached. *Kerusso* means "to cry or proclaim as a herald." It can be used of a wider message from God than just the pure gospel by proclaiming the entire truth of the Scriptures. The word does not only offer the information but also forces the hearer to act and not remain indifferent. (Acts 8:5,6; 9:20; 10:39-40; 20:25; 28:30,31; II Tim. 4:2)³⁸
- c. They announced. While *katangelo* is similar to *kerusso*, this word is used mostly with Paul in the synagogue as he explains the Word of God. It can indicate a more ceremonial style of delivery. (Acts 4:2; 13:5, 38; 15:36; 17:3)³⁹
- d. The disciples spoke. *Laleo* means "to talk" or "to tell" and is the most frequently used word to describe the evangelistic activity with an emphasis on the words used to relay the message as opposed to the general content. (Acts 4:1, 31; 5:20, 24; 11:19, 20; 14:1, 25; 16:13, 32)⁴⁰

- e. They reasoned. The word *dialegomai* is used only with Paul's discussions with non-Christians and can have the sense of a negotiation, dispute or contention. It is not used until Paul reached Thessalonica and began reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue. (Acts 17:2, 3, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8-10; 24:24, 25)⁴¹
- f. The disciples evangelized. *Euangelidzo* generally means "preached the gospel" or "told the Good News." This is a content word referring to the message told as well as to the process of telling it. (Acts 5:42; 8:4, 25, 35; 11:20; 14:5, 7, 21; 16:10)⁴²
- g. Finally, they solemnly testified. The word, *diamarturo-mai*, takes on an apologetic flavor because of the strong intellectual and emotional overtones. This is especially evident in Paul's discourse with the Jews in Acts 28:23. It originally meant to enlist someone as a witness then came to be used for passing on instructions from God. (Exod. 18:20; 19:20, 21; Neh. 9:26) While it can have the sense of urgency or exhortation, in Acts it is used as a special proclamation. (Acts 10:42; 18:5; 20:20-25; 23:11)⁴³

The identification of seven distinct and specialized forms of communication by the disciples has profound implications for today. For, as with the early Christians, every contemporary communicator of the gospel must willingly adapt his communication style and methodology according to the needs of his target audience. Today, a much greater variety of communication, marketing techniques and methods are available than existed in the first century church. May use all of them in culturally relevant ways for the glory of God.

Following Christ's Pattern

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we can learn much about how to market for effective communication by analyzing the marketing style and methodology which Jesus used during His earthly ministry. For instance, His encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-42) provides a specific marketing model for effective

communication.

- a. Jesus built a relationship with the Samaritan woman based on a common need. He then used this common need to illustrate and explore her spiritual need (John 4:7, 13, 14).
- b. He made specific statements which aroused her curiosity and addressed her felt need in a culturally relevant way (John 4:10, 13, 14, 21-26).
- c. Jesus played down the religious and cultural controversies and barriers. Although they came from different backgrounds, Christ refused to let that interfere with the spiritual need of the Samaritan woman's life. Christ was culturally flexible (John 4:9).
- d. Some followers of Jesus were confused and offended by this marketing approach (John 4:27). Those who follow Christ's example should expect the same reaction today.
- e. Jesus did not quarrel over biblical inaccuracies. The woman called Jacob her father and said that the well was given to her. Jesus could have debated her over the veracity of those comments. Instead, he never lost sight of the central issue, her spiritual condition, not her intellectual ability. At a later date these issues could be discussed (John 4:12).

In conclusion, the Bible not only *allows* for a variety of ever-changing marketing techniques but it goes so far as to *mandate* them. May we become increasingly faithful to the Word of God as we market the church in order to become effective communicators.

Marketing Through Personal Contacts

A careful scrutiny of the New Testament reveals that although there are no specific examples of early Christians inviting people to church, the normal method of communicating the gospel or developing a hearing for it (apart from preaching in the synagogue) was through what has been termed *oikos* or household evangelism. The *oikos* was the basic family unit and all the webs of relationships tied to it that made up the extended family.

Michael Green even thinks that broadly speaking it consisted of “blood relations, slaves, clients, and friends.” In other words, the early Christians made personal contacts for Jesus in the natural relationships of life.

Ronald Runyon describes it this way.

The concept of “household evangelism” meant sharing of the gospel with the people with whom a believer has some kind of personal relationship, whether family members, relatives, friends or associates. These are the people of one’s sphere of influence.⁴⁴

For example, this kind of marketing through personal contacts was used when Lydia was first saved and then she reached her household (Acts 16:14-15). After the Philippian jailer was saved, his household was also converted (Acts 16:31). Crispus, the leader of the synagogue was saved along with his household (Acts 18:8).

It is interesting to note that the biblical pattern of developing marketing contacts through “household evangelism” can extend beyond the immediate family. Cornelius is an example of that. He called together all his relatives and *close friends* and Peter came to “speak words to you (Cornelius) by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:14).

Other biblical examples of people reaching out to individuals already in their sphere of influence include: Philip bringing his friend Nathaniel to Jesus (John 1:45); Matthew reaching out to his tax collecting co-workers (Matt. 9:10); a converted demoniac telling his family (Luke 8:39); the healed blind man sharing with his family about Jesus (John 9:8); and Andrew who brought his brother to Jesus (John 1:41); and as was previously mentioned, the Samaritan woman who reached her neighbors (John 4:29).

This method allowed the early church to grow not only through additions but also through multiplication in welcoming members of entire families. One new convert can lead to many others within that sphere of influence.⁴⁵

Perhaps this emphasis on marketing through personal contacts helps to explain why the New Testament does not pre-

scribe one best method for witnessing. Rather God's Word communicates a concern:

. . .that the Christian live out his Christian conduct before his family, friends and acquaintances, keeping alert for opportunities, and then knowing how to respond (Philippians 2:14-16; Colossians 4:2-6; Titus 2:3-5; I Peter 2:11-12; 3:1-2, 13-16). This is essentially a reiterating of the Lord's exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount to let our light shine in such a way that men may see our good works and glorify God (Matthew 5:13-16)⁴⁶

Paul says it this way in I Corinthians 9:22, "I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some." Regardless of the particular marketing means which he used, the Apostle Paul bent over backwards to establish rapport with people.

As we have already seen, Jesus did the same thing with the Samaritan woman in John 4. His personal contact led to her conversion. Her conversion led to her bringing other people that knew her, so that they too were saved.

Gene Getz insightfully points out that we will succeed in marketing through personal contacts only if we follow the specific New Testament instructions on how to live the Christian life⁴⁷

The apostles taught the early Christians how to live in three key spheres of life in order to help them create an attractiveness in their communities.

- a. Home life. If a Christian husband or wife lives the faith in obedience to the Word, then that testimony will possibly attract the unsaved mate to the Lord (I Peter 3:1-7). Also, a loving Christian marriage should project a picture of Christ's love to the nonbelieving community (Eph. 5:21-33)⁴⁸
- b. Business life. Paul admonished the Thessalonians to conduct their business affairs in a proper way. Some appeared to be lazy since they expected Christ to return at any moment (I Thess. 4:11, 12; 6:1). Peter also instructed the slaves to live an exemplary lifestyle for their masters (I Peter 2:18)⁴⁹

- c. Social life. Paul wanted the unsaved friends to see the glory of God in the social lifestyle of the church (I Cor. 10:31-33). He asked the Colossians to be careful how they lived and spoke to the nonbeliever so that they would not be offended (Col. 4:5, 6). Peter also exhorted even those who were suffering to live a Christian lifestyle that God would be glorified (I Peter 2:12; 3:16)⁵⁰

Conclusion

The preceding article has set forth a biblical and theological basis for marketing the church. We are clearly called to market the church both in Matthew 28:18-20 and in Acts 1:8.

We have seen that although there are ethical hazards on the marketing landscape, church marketing is ethical when it wisely uses ever *changing methods* to communicate a *changeless message*. Using the gospels, the epistles and other theological sources, we have established the biblical validity of using marketing to attract church visitors.

Further, we have seen that church marketing is nothing more than effective, flexible, creative communication. As such, it is something which the Scriptures strongly endorse and Jesus Christ effectively practiced.

Finally, we have seen a New Testament priority on marketing through personal contacts or "household evangelism." Every believer is to be in a continual process of attracting people to Christ's church. Whether in one's lifestyle or words, in the situations of work, home, neighborhood, church or social gatherings, the witness and invitation should never stop. It is both an ongoing opportunity and a responsibility.

Paul said it this way:

For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life ... You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ (II Cor. 2:15-16a; 3:2-3b).

The biblical call to market the church is clear. The methods and situations for church marketing must vary according to the needs of the audience. The result should be a church which is growing both spiritually and numerically as it attracts new people into the fellowship. These are the biblical pillars upon which church marketing rests.

A Final Observation

In this article, I have called for a balanced, biblical approach to church marketing. I have also listed and responded to three critical critiques which are representative of those who attack church marketing. It is a shame that the body of Christ is divided over marketing issues because I believe the eternal destinies of countless lost individuals will be determined by our willingness to flexibly meet them on their own cultural levels.

Like the taut string of an archer's bow, a bow with 50-pound pull, churches repeatedly feel tension from two directions when it comes to marketing outreach. The church tends both the world and the household of faith. It reaches out to *evangelize* and reaches in to *nurture*.

There is the inevitable tension between budgeting for church maintenance and budgeting for marketing, between time spent with churchgoers and time spent with church non-goers, between targeting the uninvolved and targeting the faithful.⁵¹

One of the greatest threats to any church is the person who raises *cultural* objections about how outreach is done. The traditional church is often product driven (focusing on what it has to offer) rather than market driven (focusing on the community's needs), and that's a mistake when it comes to biblical marketing⁵²

The challenge before me as pastor of an established church is to get traditional, older believers to set aside their own *cultural* preferences so that we might be free to effectively market our unchanging, biblical message and ministry to the lost people of our community. The stakes are great. We must not fail.

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