

## The Flaws of a Fad-Driven Church, Part 1

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#### **Mainstream evangelicalism is in serious trouble.**

Now, I know that makes me sound like a pessimist. I hate to sound like such a prophet of doom, and I assure you that I am *not* a pessimist. I'm a Calvinist, and Calvinists by definition cannot be pessimistic. Seriously. But because I'm going to *sound* somewhat gloomy, I want to assure you that I see the hand of divine Providence in the outworking of history, and I know God's purposes are being fulfilled and will be fulfilled perfectly in the end. I'm not a pessimist, but that doesn't keep me from making a realistic assessment of the distressing state of current affairs in the visible church. The evangelical movement right now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is in a spiritual condition not very much different from the medieval church just before the Protestant Reformation. Think about it. Luther had to deal with Tetzels, the charlatan fund-raiser who went through Europe promising people miracles in return for money so that the Pope could build St. Peter's church in the Vatican. We've got at least a dozen Tetzels appearing daily on TBN, promising people miracles in exchange for money so that Jan Crouch can make the sets of their television studios gaudier than any room in the Vatican while she adds enough pink hair extensions to rival the Dome of St. Peter's. The medieval church was overrun with superstition and ignorance. We've got people reciting the prayer of Jabez every day who are convinced that it's a magic formula that will bring them wealth and good luck. The medieval church had Leo X and Machiavelli. We've got Bill Gothard and Gary Ezzo. The medieval church saw a decline in doctrine and morality in the church and a corresponding increase in corruption, scandal, and man-centered worship. All of that is true today. Worst of all, in the medieval era, the gospel was in eclipse and people were so woefully ignorant of biblical truth that men in Martin Luther's time could complete seminary and enter ministry without ever having learned "the first principles of the oracles of God." We're well on the road to that same situation today. Many seminaries are deliberately eliminating biblical and theological courses and replacing them with courses in business and marketing. And Christian leaders who call themselves evangelical are actually encouraging these trends.

Listen, for example, to Tony Campolo, arguing that today's evangelical seminary students need to be taught marketing savvy rather than theology and Scripture. This is from a book he co-authored with Brian McLaren, ironically titled *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel*. Yet Campolo himself has missed the point. He is actually arguing that church leaders should follow the culture and study marketing techniques rather than theology. And he suggests this would be a good thing. He writes: What if the credits eaten up by subjects seminarians seldom if ever use after graduation were instead devoted to more subjects they will

actually need in churches—like business and marketing courses? It is **not** true that with a gifted preacher, a church will inevitably grow. Good sermons may get visitors to stay once they come, but getting folks to come in the first place [will] take some marketing expertise.

It was a marketing degree, not an M. Div., that Bill Hybels had when he launched the tiny fellowship that would one day be Willow Creek Community Church. It's not that Hybels is a theological lightweight, [but he's "brilliantly relevant"]—and the relevance comes not from giftedness or theological discernment, but from thoughtfully studying his congregation. As any good marketer would, Hybels deliberately surveys his people with questionnaires in order to determine what they worry about, what their needs are, what's important to them. . . . Then he schedules what subjects he will preach on in the coming year, and circulates the schedule to those on his team responsible for music and drama in the services.

The result is preaching that is . . . acutely **relevant**. But the process isn't something you'll learn in most seminaries. Maybe it's time that some business school courses find their way into seminary.

Now, I don't know where Tony Campolo has been for the past twenty-five years or so, but if his advice sounds the least bit fresh or novel to you, you haven't been doing much reading, and you haven't been paying attention to the drift of the church growth movement over the past three decades. What Campolo is suggesting is precisely what many evangelical seminaries started doing some twenty years ago. Pastors these days are carefully indoctrinated with the notion that they must regard their people as consumers. Religion is carefully packaged to appeal to the consumers' demands. There are marketing agencies that offer seminars for church leaders to teach them how to "brand" their churches to appeal to the most people. Most church leaders these days are therefore obsessed with opinion polls, public relations, salesmanship, merchandizing, and customer satisfaction. They have been taught and encouraged to think that way by virtually every popular program of the past two decades.

In 1988 (seventeen years ago now), George Barna wrote a book titled *Marketing the Church*. It was published by NavPress—at the time a major mainstream evangelical publisher (a lot less mainstream these days). In that book, George Barna wrote, "The *audience*, not the message, is sovereign." That was the basic idea. And it's a notion that thousands of pastors and church leaders have uncritically imbibed—and it has been parroted in virtually every major book on church leadership up through and including *The Purpose-Driven Church*. The audience is sovereign. Their "felt needs" should shape the preacher's message. Opinion polls and listener response become barometers that tell the preacher what to preach. That's what Barna was calling for back in 1988. He wrote,

If [we are] going to stop people in the midst of hectic schedules and cause them to think about what we're saying, *our message has to be adapted to the needs of the audience*. When we produce advertising that is based on the take-it-or-leave-it proposition, rather than on a sensitivity and response to people's needs, people will invariably reject our message.

Compare that with the words of the apostle Paul, who (in 2 Timothy 4:2-5) said, "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the

truth, and be turned aside to fables.” What was Paul’s point? Do you think he would have agreed with Barna, who said we must adapt our message to the preferences of the audience, or risk having them reject the message?

No, Paul told Timothy: “But you . . . fulfill your ministry.” “Preach the word! . . . in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

That is what we are called to do as pastors—not follow the fads and fashions of our culture. Not even to follow the silly parade of evangelical fads that have assaulted the church in wave after wave for two decades running. The fads and the programs are killing the evangelical movement. And I’m convinced that those who do not get back to the business of preaching the Bible will soon see their churches die—because, after all, the Word of God is the *only* message that has the power to give spiritual life.

And, frankly, the death of the fad-driven churches will be a *good* thing in the long term. It’s something I hope I live long enough to see.

*This series is adapted from a Shepherds’ Conference seminar Phil gave in 2005.*

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