

The Flaws of a Fad-Driven Church, Part 3

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What Would Jabez Do?

I first became aware that trendiness (the ebb and flow of fad after fad and “every wind of doctrine”—trendiness) was becoming a driving force in the evangelical movement some 15 years ago.

At first it seemed to me like the fads were a particular problem in the charismatic movement. Remember in the early 1990s, when “the Kansas City Prophets” were all the rage? And for a couple of years, it seemed, book after book on modern prophecy was coming out. There was a book called *Some Said it Thundered* that made the rounds for awhile, making the Kansas City Prophets out to be the modern-day equivalents of Agabus in the New Testament. That lasted until the most prominent of the prophets turned out to be using his gift to manipulate women into lewd behavior with him.

And then a guy named James Ryle wrote a ridiculous book called *Hippo in the Garden*. Ryle claimed God had revealed to him that the reason the Beatles’ music was so successful was that they had a special anointing from God, and he said God was going to release the anointing again. At about the same time, Wayne Grudem released a book attempting to give an exegetical and academic defense of that kind of modern revelation.

And soon, it seemed, everyone was confused about whether God is still revealing truth, and in the charismatic movement there was an unprecedented outburst of people claiming to have received all kinds of preposterous messages from God.

But that fad died out within a couple of years and was replaced by the next big charismatic fad: the “Toronto Blessing.” I could see the amazing impact—and the growing influence—these fads were having by the volume of mail we would get from people in our radio audience who wanted to know what Grace to You thought about the latest charismatic fad.

The Toronto Blessing phase managed to keep the limelight for a couple of years or so. People would go to church to get drunk with laughter. It was a bizarre, highly emotional fad, and it was obvious from

the beginning that it could not be sustained very long.

Then there was the Pensacola Revival, which brought an obsession with gold dust and gold teeth-fillings that supposedly appeared miraculously out of nowhere. And I hope you remember all of that. I'm not going to bore you with it. But I bring it up just to say that suddenly in the early 1990s, you could see this pattern of wave after wave of new charismatic fads. For a while, I was naive enough to think that this sort of trendy mania was a uniquely charismatic phenomenon. I never thought the whole evangelical world would get caught up in the same kind of fad-driven hysteria.

I did notice a very strange and surprising fact in the early 1990s, however. No matter how bizarre things got, the latest craze always drew in more people than the previous one. A lot of formerly non-charismatic churches were duped by the Toronto Blessing. That's not easy to explain rationally. Why would a church that had resisted charismatic influences for forty years want to affirm something as irrational and unbiblical—and over-the-top silly—as a room full of people claiming to be drunk in the Spirit, rolling on the floor and laughing uncontrollably?

But it shows the power of the fad mentality and the lure of a big enough bandwagon. If enough people do something, and it becomes popular enough, it doesn't matter how bizarre, unbiblical, or irrational it is, other people will always line up to get in on it.

Then these undulating fads started to spill over into the mainstream evangelical movement. The first big one I noticed was Promise Keepers. For about two and a half or three years, you were nobody if you weren't in on Promise Keepers.

I remember someone—a friend who lives in another part of the country—called me up to talk about something. Then before he hung up, he asked, "Will I see you at Promise Keepers?"

This was before I really even aware of the size of the Promise Keepers movement. So I was clueless about what he was talking about. I said, "See me at Promise Keepers? What do you mean?"

He didn't explain to me what Promise Keepers was. He didn't think he had to. All he said was, "Everyone is going to be there." And it seemed like practically everyone was.

Then we had the "What Would Jesus Do?" era. Overlapping those was the Jabez phenomenon and the astonishing success of the "Left Behind" series. And suddenly evangelical fads entered a whole new realm. Publishers were literally raking in *billions*, not just millions, of dollars with WWJD jewelry, *Left Behind* books and their spin-offs for kids—and especially Jabez Junk. Coffee mugs, Tshirts, pens and desk calendars, wall plaques, and literally whole catalogues of Jabez merchandise.

The fads were suddenly bigger than ever, but they were beginning to look cheaper and have shorter shelf-lives than ever before. Last year's "Passion of the Christ" fad lost steam before the DVD even hit the shelves.

Then the biggest fad of all came, with its own built-in expiration date: "Forty Days of Purpose." As of two months ago [in March 2005], *The Purpose-Driven Life* had sold more than twenty million copies, making it the best-selling non-fiction book of all time, surpassing *The Diary of Anne Franke* within a few months of its release. According to a news release I read in December, spin-off Purpose-Driven merchandize has generated nearly five million units of additional sales, and that's nothing to sneeze at.

"Forty Days of Purpose" is already the most successful evangelical fad in the history of the world, making a lot of people rich and guaranteeing that we're going to see a lot of similar marketing plans and 40-day programs in the months to come. Rick Warren has already announced his next one: "Forty Days of Community." It starts in April, and you can get on the bandwagon now. The cost for a ticket to ride this fad is tailored to fit the size of your church. If you have a church of 100 people, it will only cost you \$700.

Now, I'm not going to try to squeeze a critique of *The Purpose Driven Life* into this seminar. There are plenty of helpful critiques available on-line, and one by our own Nathan Busenitz in the book you'll be receiving from Crossway titled ***Fool's Gold?*** I imagine most of you have read enough of the book to have a feel for its style and content.

But let's set the critiques aside for a moment. Even if we had no bone to pick with the content or the underlying philosophy of *The Purpose Driven Life*—is this a really the kind of book that deserves to be the best-selling evangelical work of all time? Is there anything profound or original or exceptionally brilliant about the content of this book? Is it great literature, or especially superb Bible teaching, or excellent theology made understandable in simple terms? It's none of those things. The extraordinary success of this book stems from a very clever marketing scheme that targeted a specific market at the most opportune time. It hit the shelves at a moment when the evangelical culture was ripe for fads and stampedes.

The evangelical movement is filled with people who have been trained and conditioned and encouraged to respond to every wind that blows. Rick Warren thinks it's a good thing, and he compares it to surfing. You just ride wave after wave, and that, he says, is the means God uses to bring about church growth. In *The Purpose Driven Church*, he says this:

At Saddleback Church we've . . . tried to recognize the waves God was sending our way, and we've learned to catch them. We've learned to use the right equipment to ride those waves, and we've learned the importance of balance. We've also learned to get off dying waves whenever we sensed

God wanted to do something new. The amazing thing is this: The more skilled we become in riding waves of growth, the more God sends!

Ah! so that's why we have this proliferation of fads. Evangelicals have gotten so skilled at surfing the latest fashions that God just sends more and more of them. And they get bigger every time.

I always think of my favorite Flip Wilson character, Reverend Leroy. Remember him? You surely remember his best-known parishioner, Geraldine Jones, whose signature catch-phrase was "The Devil made me do it." Reverend Leroy was the esteemed pastor of "The Church of What's Happenin' Now." In the '60s, that was funny. These days it's no joke. It seems like every church wants to be "The Church of What's Happenin' Now."

And that is an extremely dangerous position for the evangelical movement to be in. Today's fad may seem benign enough if you don't care much about biblical discernment. Rick Warren says he just wants to meet people's "felt needs" and insists he wants to remain biblical at the same time. Where's the harm in that? But that philosophy is wrong and unbiblical, because it's contrary to Paul's clear command in 2 Timothy 4, to preach the word and refuse to cater to the itch of people's "felt needs." Meanwhile, all these fads are moving us further from our evangelical commitment to the principles of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*.

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