Connecting Methodology to Marketing

In the previous section we saw how the aberrant theology of the Second Great Awakening, especially as represented by Charles Finney, let to man-centered methodology. Finney's "a revival is nothing more than the correct use of appropriate means" places onus for spiritual results on the minister who is responsible to get it right. If he does, he will see fruit, guaranteed.

The misplaced responsibility resulting from this false theology spawned religious entrepreneurs who saw it as their job to see expand ministry through *their* efforts, rather than expansion resulting from God's blessing of *His* methods. This is, fruitfulness was seen as the result of resourcefulness rather than faithfulness.

In keeping with this pragmatic emphasis, qualifications for ministry shifted to demonstration of skills over character and theology, often apart from the authorization and oversight of the local church. These parachurch ministers offered service ***to*** churches, but without accountability ***under*** a church. Of the myriad scandals that have rocked the evangelical world, most have had no oversight outside their own organization and handpicked board. False doctrine - whether regarding the gospel, ministry, or the church - leads to false methodology, siphoned resources, and devastated lives.

Building a Better Mousetrap [1]

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]

"It is important to distinguish between *advertising* and *marketing*. Advertising tells people who you are; marketing asks people what they want you to be." [3]

The Foundational Premises of Ministry Marketing are Man-Centered

Those who advocate utilizing marketing principles for ministry purposes have suggested the following definitions:

> *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.* [4]

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[1] The following taken from Dr. David Doran, *Market-Driven Ministry: Blessing or Curse?* Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal, Fall 1996.

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

[3] Ken Brown, Mid-America Conference on Preaching, *Contacting the Audience,* 2004.

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

> *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.* [5]
>
> *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.* [6]
>
> *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.* [7]

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;
(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.

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." [8] While this statement seems harmless to many, perhaps even applaudable to some, this thesis must be challenged. The church's ultimate purpose

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[5] Ibid., p. 23.

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

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

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

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). 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 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,

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[9] These 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).

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

[11] Not 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]).

> *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 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 a 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,

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

[13] Ibid., p. 12.

[14] John 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.

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

> *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]

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 the New Testament. [21]

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

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

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

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

[21] The common texts used in defense of this position, 1 Cor 9:18–23 and Acts 17:22–31, do not to support this conclusion.

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 deemphasize 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 it 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 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
- Evangelism Built on Felt Needs Undermines the *Content* of the Gospel Message

[22] Cf. 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.