

Introduction

Religion is big business. The churches, parachurch ministries, publishing houses, music producers, concerts, and conferences that comprise “The Evangelical-Industrial Complex” garner BILLIONS of dollars each year. And corporate America has noticed, with once Christian-owned labels now the property of secular publishers and producers. The simple church and mission described in the Bible has become more like the Fortune 500.

In *The Business of Religion: How We Got Here*, we’ll see the theological and cultural shifts that have led to where we are and compare to God’s Word to be reminded of where we should be, and must remain.

Selling Jesus

The evangelist Billy Sunday wasn’t afraid to try something new. He would jump on top of a pulpit if he thought it would get attention. He would sell shares of a revival [meeting], complete with “stock certificates” guaranteeing the bearer a portion of the proceeds, if he thought it would bring in enough money to fund the business of preaching the gospel.

In 1934, Sunday was deciding who would publish his next book. He had two publishers, William Eerdmans and Pat Zondervan, come meet him at the same time. Each man was surprised to find the other in the meeting. Then Sunday asked them both to pray out loud. In a prayer competition. Which he would judge. The two men did pray, Sunday judged that Zondervan’s extemporaneous prayer was best, and he awarded the 25-year-old’s company with the contract for *Billy Sunday Speaks!*

Around 1875, when evangelist Dwight L. Moody gave his brother-in-law Fleming H. Revell exclusive rights to publish authorized versions of Moody sermons. There were various unofficial versions floating around, and Moody was concerned about his lack of control over his brand. Revell publications included Moody’s signature, attesting to the authenticity of the product, as well as the explanation that “all former books in Mr. Moody’s name have been mere compilations, issued without his consent.”

After only a few years, Revell went from being Moody’s personal press to something more. Revell started billing itself as a “Publisher of Evangelical Literature” in 1880. It published texts that appealed to a swath of Protestants, giving those Protestants a sense of connection and common identity.

[One Revell] bestseller was *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life* ... Author Hannah Whitall Smith told readers that theology wasn’t as important as trusting in God.

[In his book, *Evangelicalism Incorporated*], Daniel Vaca shows evangelical publishers have had to continually work to account for commercial religion, explaining how religious values and business practices really do align.

Perhaps the most interesting case of this is the story of how Zondervan became part of HarperCollins, which is a subsidiary of News Corp, the Rupert Murdoch-owned conglomerate that does \$9 billion in annual business [News Corp also owns the Wall Street Journal, and other Murdoch family own the Fox constellation of media enterprises – Fox News, Fox Business, local TV stations, etc.].

First the family business went public, incorporating and selling shares on the stock market in 1975. This meant that anyone could own a piece of Zondervan, regardless of whether or not they shared the company's Christian commitments. Executives argued, however, that the pursuit of dividends would not conflict with the religious mission. The stocks would be sold to people who "wanted to see their money working in two ways: first, to grow in an investment situation, and second, to be supportive of a kingdom cause."

And, in fact, Zondervan profits increased 50 percent from 1976 to 1979. In 1983, one popular analyst praised Zondervan as the year's "best stock buy." But then the company's value took a tumble, prompted in part by an error in the computerization of the inventory process, and some shareholders experienced a crisis of faith. A British investor launched a hostile takeover bid in 1986, and was only stopped when Zondervan sold itself to News Corp—at a discount of \$10 per share.

The company agreed to forego some profits to maintain its identity. In the process, Zondervan became part of a multinational media conglomerate, committed above all to profits.¹

[News Corp also owns Christian publishing label, Thomas Nelson]

Pop Goes the Music

Capitol Christian Music Group, the leading Christian music label, is a division of Capitol Music Group, which is wholly owned by Universal Music Group (UMG), a massive secular multinational music corporation.

Provident Label Group, A prominent Christian music label that operates under Sony Music Entertainment, a large secular global entertainment conglomerate.

Word Records, Historically a major Christian label, is part of Warner Music Group.

VeggieTales Has Sold Out

VeggieTales is owned by NBC Universal, a subsidiary of Comcast.

When *Larry the Cucumber* has compromised, there is no hope ☺.

¹ Daniel Silliman, *The Business of Evangelical Book Publishing Is Business*, Christianity Today, December 12, 2019.

Connecting Theology to Methodology

Revival vs. Revivalism ²

Ian Murray, in his book, *Revival and Revivalism*, says that a new view of revival came into vogue during the latter half of the nineteenth century—a view which displaced the old with a distinctly different understanding of the subject. A shift in vocabulary marked the change. He writes,

Seasons of revival became “revival meetings.” Instead of being “surprising” they might now be even announced in advance, and whereas no one in the previous [eighteenth] century had known of ways to secure a revival, a system was now popularized by “revivalists” which came near to guaranteeing results. ³

Underlying the shift in vocabulary was a radical change in doctrine, which in turn led to a different approach to ministry.

There are serious differences between revival and revivalism:

- (1) Revival may be considered theocentric; revivalism, anthropocentric.
- (2) Revival comes from God, as a sovereign, undeserved gracious bestowal of renewal; revivalism is the work of man, with emphasis on human ability and agency.
- (3) Revival emphasizes the instrumental *means* that God has given revivalism – the gospel (Romans 10:15-17) and prayer (James 5:16) – with results dependent on God; Revivalism makes methodology, rather than God alone, the *effectual* cause of spiritual results. Revivalism misplaces reliance—upon a strategy, a formula, or a program, rather than upon the Holy Spirit.
- (4) Revival produces genuine scriptural and lasting results, such as continuance in the faith; revivalism produces superficial commitment that soon abates with time and trials.

Historical Contrasts

History documents the stark difference between these two approaches. Unfortunately, many of the vestiges of revivalism survive in the life of evangelicalism, such that many Christians in our day have the mistaken notion that the methods to which they have been exposed are those authorized by God.

The First Great Awakening (1734 - 1741)

God sent the marvelous light of the gospel that resulted in a spiritual awakening of hundreds of people. A couple of contextual factors reveal that the First Great Awakening was surely a work of God:

² Taken largely from Dr. Gerald Priest, *Revival and Revivalism: A Historical and Doctrinal Evaluation*, DBSJ, Fall 1996.

³ Quoted in *ibid*.

First, the revival proceeded in the context of strong doctrinal preaching of the gracious gospel, against sin, and specifically, as a result of that transforming truth upon “which the church stands or falls”—justification through faith alone in Christ alone by God’s grace alone.

Second, it was a divine work that took the people by *surprise*. The townspeople did not seek out salvation at first, but were, in Jonathan Edwards’ words, “wrought upon in a very remarkable manner.”

The First Great Awakening came unexpectedly by God’s mercy on a sinful people and in the context of God-centered doctrinal proclamations from Spirit-empowered preachers such as Theodorus Frelinghuysen, Gilbert Tennent, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield. Their messages centered on the holiness of God, condemnation of sin, justification by faith, and the new birth produced solely by the power of God through the instrumentality of His Word. In a profound way, *God-centered theology produced a genuine revival*.

The Second Great Awakening (1795 – 1835)

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, a theological change took place that was to have enormous consequences on the way Americans would come to view revival: Many adopted the view that people have a natural ability to accept the gospel. This assumption was based on the faulty assertion that the posterity of Adam are not guilty of his transgression.

“New Haven Theology” (so called due to its being popularized at Yale College in New Haven, CT) was picked up by Charles Finney who translated it into a system of revivalism advocating unblushingly that *revival may be and should be generated by human means*. This is a dangerous and false presumption. Such a course replaces principle with pragmatism. The Holy Spirit becomes an agent at man’s disposal and revival is reduced to methodology and manipulation calculated to produce moral results.

Finney asserted that “a revival is the result of the right use of the appropriate means.” Those means included the adoption of controversial “new measures” which were calculated to produce conversions:

- (1) His use of the anxious bench at the front of the meeting house was a tactic to pressure sinners to come forward and “pray through” until they found Christ. The assumption was that if a person came to the bench he would be converted.
- (2) Finney’s use of publicity and protracted meetings sensationalized evangelism. Again, his philosophy was that revivals could be and should be promoted by any method that worked.
- (3) Last and perhaps most offensive was Finney’s belief that revival was not a miracle, but the right use of proper means. If men followed a prescribed list of moral criteria for revival, it would occur. Finney repeatedly argued that results were the infallible proof that what he preached was correct: “The results justify my methods.”

Connecting Methodology to Marketing