

MORE ON THE FAD-DRIVEN CHURCH

http://phillipjohnson.blogspot.com/2005_07_01_phillipjohnson_archive.html

by Phil Johnson, July 20, 2005

In the book Tony Campolo co-authored with Brian McLaren (*Adventures In Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel*) Campolo seems to suggest that seminarians ought to pay more attention to marketing techniques and less attention to theology, exegesis, and other traditional seminary curricula. After all, those are academic subjects with limited *practical* significance, and pastors these days hardly ever *use* such stuff after seminary. In Campolo's own words:

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 may 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, contrary to some critics. His sermons are biblically sound and brilliantly relevant to the needs of his congregation—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 utterly biblical and 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.

I don't know where Tony Campolo has been for the past twenty-five years or so, but if that advice sounds the least bit fresh or novel to you, you haven't been paying attention to the drift of the church growth movement and its influence in seminaries 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 thoroughly indoctrinated with the notion that they must regard their people as consumers. Religion is carefully packaged to appeal to the consumers' demands. There are even marketing agencies that specialize in church marketing. (Typical slogan: "Changing the Way the World Looks at Christians.") There are seminars for church leaders who want to learn how to "brand" their churches as a marketing strategy.

This stuff is everywhere. Fad-driven® pastors can even buy prepackaged, market-tested sermon ideas or whole sermon series. ("New fall message series designs!" now available.)

Church leaders these days are *obsessed* with image, opinion polls, public relations, salesmanship, merchandising, and customer satisfaction. They have been taught and encouraged to think that way by virtually every popular program of the past two decades.

It has been nearly twenty years since George Barna published *Marketing the Church*. In that book, he proposed this then-revolutionary notion: "The *audience*, not the message, is sovereign." That is the basic idea that underlies every Fad-Driven® church. 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 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" (2 Timothy 4:2-5).

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?

I think not. Here's what the apostle actually *did* say to 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 pastors are called to do—not ape the fads and fashions of our culture. Not even to follow the silly parade of *evangelical* fads. I'm convinced that those who do not get back to the business of preaching the Bible will soon see their churches shrivel and 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.

Note from Pastor Kevin: If we are in the last of the last days, then we can expect the fad driven church to continue leading the sheep into apostasy until the rapture of the true church occurs (2 Thes 2:3). Then the fad driven church will be joining with all the other false religions as the world creates a world government and world religion. The leaders of this change will promise peace and prosperity but deliver death and destruction until, as Jesus said, nearly all life will be lost. We can rejoice that Jesus promised His Kingdom would come and His will, will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. I can't wait.