Biblical Perspectives Magazine **Volume 27, Number 9, February 23 to March 1, 2025**

Is It Wrong to Market the Church?

By John Frame

May 21, 2012

For some fifteen years now, there has been a steady stream of literature opposing the "marketing" of the church. David Wells[1] is responsible for a great deal of this, but others have made similar points. This critique is directed mostly against churches who appeal to the "felt needs" of people, promising such things as a friendly congregation, a beautiful building, lively music, and relevant preaching. Often such churches will take surveys in the community, to find out what people like and dislike about churches, and they will seek to use that information in their outreach. If people say they prefer contemporary music, they will advertise that they use contemporary music. If people say they don't like long sermons, the church will advertise the brevity of its sermons. And churches have been known to alter, not only their advertising, but even their church programs, to conform with the desires of the community.

These types of advertising follow the advice of marketing professionals, who in turn follow a consumerist principle: give people what they want. For Wells and others, this is a terrible deviation from the nature of the church and the gospel. In Scripture, the gospel is not something that people want, but something they resist until the Holy Spirit turns their heart around. And worship is to be determined by God in Scripture, not by the felt needs of unregenerate people.

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul tells us that he adjusts his presentation of the gospel in some degree to fit the audience:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

---

[1] In *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), and other writings. Cf. my earlier critique in "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997), 269-318, with replies by Muller and Wells and a closing statement by me. I also published the article without the replies as "Sola Scriptura and Theological Method," an Appendix to *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), 175-201

Some aspects of communication are determined by the audience, though of course the content of the gospel message always stays the same. Paul doubtless adjusted his language (Aramaic or Greek, for example), his clothing, his diet, his conformity to Jewish ceremonial laws, local customs, etc. according to what would most enhance communication.

This adjustment presupposes some understanding of the local cultures, indeed of their felt needs. When Paul went before an Athenian audience in Acts 17:22-34, he did not expound Scripture to them, as he typically did with Jewish audiences. He did allude to the Old Testament, and certainly everything he said is true to the written word of God. But Paul's main appeal was to general revelation, to the God that the Athenians knew, because that God had given them "life, and breath, and everything" (verse 27). He alludes also to their religion (verses 22-23) and their poets (verse 28). His gospel in Athens is the same as what he preaches everywhere: Jesus and the Resurrection (verse 31). But his communication is highly influenced by his knowledge of his audience.

So insofar as religious surveys give us data about the people of a neighborhood, they are all to the good. And it is certainly not wrong to use such data in determining *how* to communicate the gospel in that place. If they all speak Spanish as their native language, then the service should be in Spanish. If there is a cultural bias against long sermons, there is no reason why the initial sermons, at least, shouldn't be short. The gospel itself, of course, is offensive to unbelief. But there are also offenses unrelated to the gospel, such as violations of social customs. We should present the gospel in its full offensiveness, but we should not offend in ways that are unrelated to the gospel. We should not offend for the sake of offending. Nor should we communicate in ways calculated to make us comfortable, but which detract from the understanding of the people.

The science of marketing can help us to understand the culture of an area, and it can suggest ways in which we can best communicate. Of course, if a marketer tells us that we should not mention sin, or that people prefer not to hear of blood atonement, the Scriptures must prevail over human the human advice. But there are many areas in which we would be wise to take the advice of marketers.

It is not always easy to make such decisions. If marketers tell us that people want food before worship, to what extent can we comply with the suggestion without falsifying the gospel? That is, to what extent will we be seen as trying to buy their attention, rather than presenting the gospel as God's free grace? It is not necessarily bad to offer breakfast in connection with worship; but that can be misunderstood. Those kinds of issues have to be thought out. The answers are not obvious. But it doesn't help us to be told that marketing is somehow wrong in itself.

The Christian faith is a missionary religion. It is outreach-oriented. The main task of the church is the Great Commission, which tells us to take the gospel to all nations. The preaching of the word is not only for people who are Christians already. So the questions of contextualization cannot be avoided by simply carrying on according to traditional patterns. We will always face the question of how to reach out to the unchurched. In any outreach, there is something *like* marketing going on. As corporations offer products, the church offers eternal life. Eternal life is free, but there is the condition of faith. Corporations also require conditions to be fulfilled, in their case usually monetary. Preaching the gospel is not marketing, but it is *analogous* to marketing. How far does the analogy go and the disanalogy begin? We need to do hard thinking on that score, not just reprobate anything that even looks a bit like marketing.

I think that a lot of the criticism of marketing arises from the *crassness* of many marketing appeals today. Much advertising today tries to bypass the customer's critical faculties. Much of it is silly, unrelated to anything that the viewer might use to reach a serious decision. Much of it (especially the use of sex as a come-on) is degrading, contrary to biblical ethics. That sort of thing, of course, is inappropriate to the advertising of a church.

But is it *crass* to tell people that your services are relatively short, that your pews are comfortable, that your people are friendly, that your music is high quality, etc? Are such statements a betrayal of the gospel? If these statements are truthful, I cannot condemn them. Some are leery about such things, I think, just because they *sound like advertising*, and advertising in general is unworthy of the church. But I think something like advertising is inevitable in a religion of outreach. What is worthy and what is not is a subject worthy of discussion. But we should resolve such questions, not on the basis of our feelings toward such language, but out of our appreciation of the nature of the gospel. Indeed, it might be that to best present the gospel in some situation we will need to offend some Christian sophisticates in order to reach those who need to be reached.

People sometimes claim that a church's only advertisement should be the gospel itself. But I don't see any biblical justification for that claim. If I call my non-Christian neighbor on the phone and ask him to come to church with me, I am not at that moment presenting the gospel. If he comes with me on the basis of that invitation, his motives, likely, will not be to adore Jesus. Rather, he will most likely be motivated by his friendship with me, or perhaps sheer curiosity. Neither of those motives, of course, are the best. But one cannot conclude that I was wrong to invite him without presenting the gospel over the phone. The notion that advertising must always make the gospel the central point, I think, is simply wrong. Paul's speech in Acts 17 contains "come-ons" (verses 22-23) before he gets to his main point. Most sermons do. There is no reason why we cannot spend some time just getting acquainted before fully presenting the gospel.

And, is it wrong to address “felt needs?” Certainly the “felt needs” of many are selfish, wants rather than true needs. The ministry of the church should, at some point, and in some way, rebuke such selfish desires. But we should remember that the Bible itself addresses many needs that people feel today: the need for community, affirmation, status (sons and daughters of God!), love, meaning, marital and family unity, strength in trial, etc., etc. It would not be wrong, I think, even to survey a community to determine which of these problems are most deeply felt, and then to present a sermon series about it. If someone says this is “marketing,” we can admit that without great loss. The issue is not whether a church practice fits under the label “marketing,” but whether it is in accord with Scripture.

So I don’t think the church should condemn marketing with a broad brush. To do that short-cuts the process of hard thinking we need to do in order to understand how best to reach people for Christ.