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Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church (Book Review)

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the God-breathed material of creation is now a living being. "Being" or "soul" in this text refers to the totality of the human being. It extends to Adam's toes and body hair as surely as to any allegedly "spiritual" element.

It is unfortunate that the authors see the issue of human constitution as a simple either/or equation. Either one holds to a body/soul, spiritual/material dualism, or one necessarily falls into a naturalist monism (38). Of all the Biola faculty, Moreland states the problematic most blatantly:

The issue of substance dualism, then, is not an isolated question of merely intellectual interest. A broad world view clash between scientific naturalism and Christian theism is lurking behind the scene. Thus, substance dualism is of interest to the believer because it seems to be the most natural way to understand biblical anthropology and, further, if substance dualism is true, it weakens the adequacy of scientific naturalism as a total, self-contained account of the origin, development, and nature of life, especially human life. (56)

Substance dualism is put forward as the sole bulwark against naturalist anthropology. If naturalism is monist, the only safe haven from secularist apostasy is dualism. But rejecting what is false does not guarantee that one is embracing what is right. The mirror image of error is not always truth. Truth is singular while error is plural. Naturalist monism and a matter/spirit dualism are not the only options. I would suggest that Scripture does not presuppose or describe a spiritual realm discreet from a material realm, but a spiritual dimension or directionality that pervades all reality. As Adam is soul in his totality, so he is a spiritual being in his totality. This means that everything he does is a spiritual (God related) activity. If man did not possess a soul would this then mean that he is not related and ultimately accountable to God? This seems to be the fear that haunts the Biola authors. Is a horse related to God? A tree? A rock? A comet? Who created and sustains all these things? The question finally is not "What is man?" but "What is the domain of divine authority and activity?" Biola appears to imprison God within the soul of man.

If God is not sovereign over the "natural man," what is? Biola's answer: reason. Indeed, reason is idolized as the norm which stands above even the *a priori* position Moreland assigns to theology. In his introduction Moreland defines theology as "the propositions, theories, and methodology Christians believe to be rational, true components of 'historical, biblical Christianity'" (8).

Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church, by Douglas D. Webster (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP) 1992. 165 pages, paperback, \$9.99. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

How do you preach the gospel to a consumer-oriented, success-focused, technologically sophisticated, sex-crazed,

Theology concerns itself with ideas about that which transcends the phenomenal realm. The test of those ideas is reason. Thus, Moreland argues that substance dualism is true because it makes "life after death more reasonable" (56). I would respond that reason cannot be elevated to the status that Moreland and the Biola authors want to give it. Reason is not an absolute thing out there somewhere; it is an activity, a human activity. As such it is thoroughly human in character, that is to say, created, finite, and historical. The norm of truth is not some abstract, autonomous reason, but Jesus Christ as he is mediated to us by Scripture. And that norm, relational, covenantal, and historically mediated, is the standard not only for theology, but for psychology, sociology, physical education, and anthropology.

While I appreciate the kind of job security for the theologian within the academy that follows from Biola's exaltation of theology to a necessary mediator of "spiritual things," I find it essential to call this tactic by its true name: simple priestcraft. Neither theology (nor philosophy) can be thought of as the dispenser of divine norms for other academic disciplines. The Bible is not the theologian's property. Theology cannot be understood as the science whose task it is to discover and define all specifically Christian knowledge and perspective. Such an understanding secularizes all other areas of human endeavor. Under this view all other disciplines would have to come begging to theology in order to learn how to conduct themselves from a Christian perspective. The Bible is for all of life, for every person in every obedient walk of life, and hence, it is there for every discipline. Scripture's redeeming and sanctifying Word and normative light inform every academic discipline, every human endeavor. By the light of his inscripturated Word, we know that God is sovereign over and has set laws and norms for every aspect and realm of life. The starting point for academic and curricular integration is simply this: that all of our endeavor stands before the face of God (*coram deo*) and under the norm of Scripture (*sola scriptura*). The test of Christianity is not reason. Rather, the test of reason is Christ. There is no rationality independent of religious conviction. To follow the Biola agenda (to first ask: how does my discipline think of human being, and then to ask: is it compatible with theological findings) runs the risk of missing the radicality of the fact that the person and work of Christ concerns the whole of reality and the Word of God holds for all of life. Truly redeeming Christian academia seeks to spell out the meaning of the person and work of Christ in every realm of life. And it must begin there.

morally relativistic, entertainment-centered, and above all self-obsessed culture? Well, you might acknowledge that

these are the attributes of your hearers, your market niche, and then capitalize on it by presenting the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ as an exciting, high-tech, consumer good that will guarantee financial success, good health, increased sex appeal, and a general improvement of one's sense of personal well-being. That, according to Webster, is giving the gospel context, Church-Growth style. Sound a bit cynical? Which part, the cultural analysis or the description of the Church-Growth movement? Let's take each in turn.

Webster is certainly a cynic regarding post-modern North American culture. Echoing sociologists and social critics as diverse as Christopher Lasch, Allan Bloom, Neil Postman, and Harry Blamires, Webster thinks that the only thing that stands between the utter relativism of postmodern culture and outright nihilism is narcissistic self-indulgence (64-66). "The new sacred order" holds that the individual has a moral duty to self. The gospel of individualistic concern and self-indulgence is the theme of every television commercial, and is the functional presupposition of the media mouthpiece, left to right, Howard Stern to Rush Limbaugh.

Is Webster cynical of the Church Growth movement? Yes. The title of the book is enough to tell readers they will be reading a polemic against the Church Growth fad. Yet Webster levels his critique without rancor. He does not view the Church Growth leader as a wild-eyed heretic. The agenda of bringing market strategies to ecclesiastical outreach is wrong, but those who do it are not evil or sinful people. In fact, Webster sees it as a bad solution to a real problem. When the Church Growth leader looks at the church, he sees an inflexible and ingrown institution stuck in worn-out forms and irrelevant, hidebound ways, hawking its wares in archaic and unintelligible language. He wants the church to be exciting, fresh, and relevant to the late twentieth century. The critique of the church as stodgy, tradition-bound, and reluctant to change is true, and the wish to make it contemporary and meaningful is both commendable and necessary. The question, as Webster sees it, is one of appropriate means.

The answer, according to the Church Growth movement, lies right before our eyes. Rather than resist the fact that we are a consumer-oriented culture, we ought to accept it, and employ the strategies of the marketplace. We are a culture of consumers. If we are to contextualize the gospel for North Americans, we'd better make it relevant to consumers. If the church is to compete in the marketplace of modern allegiance and influence, it must employ the communication techniques and package its product as our consumerist culture does. The successful church will find its market niche by identifying its target audience, and it will strive to meet a wide range of felt needs for its audience by being professional and excellent,

selecting dynamic leadership, and creating a positive and exciting atmosphere.

But are consumerist marketing strategies as neutral as the Church Growth leader would have us believe? Is anything lost in the pragmatic, cost-effective, and needs-oriented church of the Church Growth movement? As Webster asks the question more than once, can we become so concerned about practicality that anything worth practicing is forfeited? The Church Growth leader insists that marketing the church is not a new way of perceiving the gospel. It's not about a new gospel but merely coping with social change, competing with the entertainments of the day by offering an attractive alternative. It's about making the gospel respond to the perceived needs of the consumer. It's about giving a context to the gospel, not the gospel itself. Webster's fear, however, is that "a church could master the art of marketing but neglect faithfulness, justice and mercy. The 'successful' church may be more entertaining than edifying and more exciting than holy" (56). The danger that something may be lost is real. But is it necessary? Webster may sound like nothing more than a stick-in-the-mud here. But not so. He understands that while we do need to contextualize the gospel in such a way that moderns can hear it, the gospel is lost when it is accommodated to the prevailing ethos of a culture. The church of Jesus Christ is called to say NO to the baal cult of materialistic consumerism, not syncretistically bring it into the congregation of Yahweh (27, 127).

But perhaps we are still getting ahead of things. Although a bit disorganized, Webster concentrates on two issues that identify the Church Growth movement as consumerist culture religion. The first is the marketing strategy of audience identification, locating one's market niche. Webster quotes Bill Hybels as speaking for the Church Growth movement: "Generally a pastor can define his appropriate target audience by determining with whom he would like to spend a vacation or an afternoon of recreation" (58). Webster notes that the Church Growth movement rarely "targets" the poor, the aged, students, Afro-Americans, or Hispanics. Who are targeted almost exclusively? White, middle-class, college-educated, baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964. People who center on their families, focus on their careers, are oriented on consuming, and live in suburbs. In short, people with whom Hybels might play golf (58-59). Webster responds:

Discovering your market niche to be the upwardly mobile, success-driven, child-centered baby boomer may not require focusing on a target audience as much as ignoring the church's mission. Limiting outreach to people who understand our sense of humor, live in similar homes, earn a professional income, share the same family concerns and eat in the same restaurants may create a comfort zone for

evangelism, but it may also limit our spiritual growth and dependence upon God. (69)

The second indicator of cultural accommodation in the Church Growth movement is the loss of the gospel in the rush to fill consumer "needs." Our culture no longer speaks of sin and salvation, guilt and grace. The only language it knows is the relativist language of individualist comfort. The Church Growth marketing strategy here is to identify what baby boomers want out of life, and then seek to give it to them (59). But in *seeking* to become a supplier of social and emotional fixes, the church reduces "sin and evil to personal problems of low self-esteem and insecurity" (66). The rock group U2 perfectly expresses the spirit of the age: "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." What is the baby boomer looking for? Self-acceptance, a way to feel better about himself, a way to make his marriage work, a method to help him manage his money? What is the seeker generation looking for? The self. The religion of the consumer is the religion of the self seeking satisfaction. As the lady said in the Buick commercial: "I *need* electric window lifts and leather upholstery." Again Webster responds:

A critical question for the market-sensitive church is whether insight into the mind and culture of the baby boomer generation is a prophetic penetration of this market niche with the gospel or promotes a culturally compatible affirmation of the culture. (66)

When does contextualization slide into cultural accommodation? When the gospel loses its culturally subversive power. The church will "succeed" only by being subversive, by being faithful to its promise to be the people of God, by being faithful to the kingdom of God. The church fulfills its mission when it presents a consistent ethical challenge to its culture. Rather than reading marketing reports and seeking a more entertaining church experience, rather than looking to the marketplace to understand what appeals to the baby boomer's heart, we

need to be using the Word of God to penetrate and resist the norms and expectations of consumerist culture. We need to resist "the religious powers' accommodating efforts to reassure people that their greedy consumption, entertaining worship and striving for success [meets] with God's approval" (70).

The church, if it is faithful to its mission, will never be successful as the world gauges success. In fact, the gospel will exclude as well as include: "it admits those who obey the will of God and rejects those who deny it" (17). It is faithfulness, and not marketing strategy, that will make the church effective in its mission. Jesus was not a successful, triumphalist Messiah. He was a Messiah who hung out with the disabled, the outsiders, the prostitutes. He was a Messiah who deliberately shocked and challenged his hearers. He was a Messiah who managed to alienate just about everybody (108). Webster is not saying that the church should ignore its culture. He is simply recognizing that the cross can never be made comfortable or accommodating. Quite simply, the church is called to be a community that is marked by the cross, and the gospel it preaches is not that the cross will make you happy, healthy, and successful, but that the cross will make you forgiven. The issue of the cross is not sadness but sin. Quoting Stephen Arterburn and John Felton, Webster puts his finger on the real rub: "the self-obsessed are not interested in feeding anyone else's sheep or helping others in any way. They concentrate on how others can meet their needs, especially how God can relieve them of their burdens" (93). The cross will never be successfully marketed in such a culture. The call is still: "follow me." Denying self, bearing one's cross, showing concern for others, seeking justice, and being faithful cannot be manipulated. They thrive by God's grace, and they are embodied as the people of God seek to participate in God's redemptive purposes. Webster's book helps us see this more clearly.