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Reformation
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Truth vs. Technique

John F. MacArthur, Jr.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century ... the Age of Exposition began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business.¹

In this Age of Show Business, truth is irrelevant; what really matters is whether we are entertained. Substance hardly matters; style is everything. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message. Unfortunately, that kind of thinking rules the church as surely as it does the world.

A.W. Tozer wrote these words in 1955:

For centuries the church stood solidly against every form of worldly entertainment, recognizing it for what it was—a device for wasting time, a refuge from the disturbing voice of conscience, a scheme to divert attention from moral accountability. For this she got herself abused roundly by the sons of this world. But of late she has become tired of the abuse and has given over the struggle. She appears to have decided that if she cannot conquer the great god Entertainment she may as well join forces with him and make what use she can of his powers. So today we have the astonishing spectacle of millions of dollars being poured into the unholy job of providing earthly entertainment for the so-called sons of heaven. Religious entertainment is in many places rapidly crowding out the serious things of God. Many churches these days have become little more than poor theaters where fifth-rate “producers” peddle their shoddy wares with the full approval of evangelical leaders who can even quote a holy text in defense of their delinquency. And hardly a man dares raise his voice against it.²

By today's standards, the issues that so inflamed Tozer's passions seem trifling. For example, churches were attracting people to Sunday evening services by showing Christian films. Young people's rallies featured up-tempo music and speakers whose specialty was humor. High energy games

and activities were beginning to play a key role in church youth work. Looking back, it may seem difficult to understand Tozer's distress. Hardly anyone these days would be shocked or concerned about any of the methods that seemed radically innovative in the 1950s. Most of them are generally regarded as conventional today.

Tozer, however, was not condemning games, music styles, or movies per se. He was concerned with the ministry philosophy underlying what was happening in the church. He was sounding an alarm about a deadly change of focus. He saw evangelicals using entertainment as a tool for church growth, and he believed that was subverting the church's priorities. He feared that frivolous diversions and carnal amusements in the church would eventually destroy people's appetites for real worship and the preaching of God's Word.

He was right about that. In fact, Tozer's rebuke is more fitting than ever as the church approaches the end of the century. The incipient trend he identified has come into full bloom in our generation. What the church was flirting with thirty-five years ago has now become an obsession.

A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* described one well-known church's bid "to perk up attendance at Sunday evening services." The church "staged a wrestling match, featuring church employees. To train for the event, 10 game employees got lessons from Tugboat Taylor, a former professional wrestler, in pulling hair, kicking shins and tossing bodies around without doing real harm."³ No harm to the staff members, perhaps, but what is the effect of such an exhibition on the church's message? Is not the gospel itself clouded and badly caricatured by such tomfoolery? Can you imagine what Tozer would have thought?

That wrestling match was not an obscure example from some eccentric church on the fringe. It took place in the Sunday evening service of one of America's five largest

churches. Similar examples could be drawn from many of the leading churches supposedly in the mainstream of evangelical orthodoxy.

Some will maintain that if biblical principles are presented, the medium doesn't matter. That is nonsense. If an entertaining medium is the key to winning people, why not go all out? Why not have a real carnival? A tattooed acrobat on a high wire could juggle chain saws and shout Bible verses while a trained dog balanced on his head. That would draw a crowd. And the *content* of the message would be thoroughly biblical. It's a bizarre scenario, but one that illustrates how the medium can cheapen and corrupt the message.

And sadly, it's not terribly different from what is actually being done in some churches. There seems no limit to what modern church leaders will do to entice people who aren't interested in worship and preaching.

One noted pastor of a very large church, for example, boasts about the time his staff staged a pie fight during a Sunday morning church service.

Just how far will the church go to compete with Hollywood? A large church in the southwestern United States has installed a half-million-dollar-special-effects system that can produce smoke, fire, sparks, and laser lights in the auditorium. The church sent staff members to study live special effects at Bally's Casino in Las Vegas. The pastor ended one service by ascending to "heaven" via invisible wires that drew him up out of sight while the choir and orchestra added a musical accompaniment to the smoke, fire, and light snow.⁴ It was just a typical Sunday show for that pastor: "He packs his church with such special effects as ... cranking up a chain saw and toppling a tree to make a point ... the biggest Fourth of July fireworks display in town and a Christmas service with a rented elephant, kangaroo and zebra. The Christmas show features 100 clowns with

gifts for the congregation's children." ⁵

Shenanigans like that would have been the stuff of A.W. Tozer's worst nightmares. Surely even he could not have foreseen the extreme to which evangelicals would go in paying homage to the great god Entertainment.

Driven by Pragmatism

There's no denying that these antics seem to work—that is, they draw a crowd. Many churches that have experimented with such methods report growing attendance figures. And a handful of megachurches—those that can afford first-class productions, effects, and facilities—have been able to stimulate enormous numerical growth. Some of them fill huge auditoriums with thousands of people several times each week.

A few of these megachurches resemble elegant country clubs or resort hotels. They feature impressive facilities with bowling lanes, movie theaters, health spas, restaurants, ballrooms, and state-of-the-art multi-court gymnasiums. Recreation and entertainment are inevitably the most visible aspects of these enterprises. Such churches have become meccas for students of church growth.

Now evangelicals everywhere are frantically seeking new techniques and new forms of entertainment to attract people. Whether a method is biblical or not scarcely matters to the average church leader today. Does it *work*? That is the new test of legitimacy. And so raw pragmatism has become the driving philosophy in much of the visible church.

Pragmatism is the notion that ideas may be judged by their practical consequences. A pragmatist concludes that a course of action or concept is right if it brings good results, wrong if it doesn't seem to work.

What's wrong with pragmatism? After all, common sense involves a measure of legitimate pragmatism, doesn't it? If a dripping faucet works fine after you replace the washers,

for example, it is reasonable to assume that bad washers were the problem. If the medicine your doctor prescribes produces harmful side effects or has no effect at all, you need to ask if there's a remedy that works. Such simple pragmatic realities are generally self-evident.

But when pragmatism becomes a guiding philosophy of life and ministry, it inevitably clashes with Scripture. Spiritual and biblical truth cannot be determined by what works and what doesn't. We know from Scripture, for example, that the gospel does not usually produce a positive response (1 Cor. 1:22-23; 2:14). On the other hand, Satanic lies and deception often are quite effective (Matt. 24:23-24; 2 Cor. 4:3-4). Majority reaction is no test of validity (cf. Job 12:6). Pragmatism as a guiding philosophy of ministry is inherently flawed. ⁶

Nevertheless, an overpowering surge of ardent pragmatism is sweeping through evangelicalism. *Methodology* has replaced *theology* as the main issue many church leaders are concerned with. Pastors are turning to books on marketing methods in search of new techniques to help churches grow. Many seminaries have shifted their pastoral training emphasis from Bible curriculum and theology to matters of style and technique.

Perhaps most telling is the growing number of churches that now feature drama and entertainment along with self-help seminars instead of traditional services where God's Word is proclaimed. The new pragmatism sees preaching as *pas*. Plainly declaring biblical truth is deemed too offensive and utterly ineffective. We're now told we can get better results by first amusing people and thus wooing them into the fold. Once they feel comfortable, they'll be ready to receive biblical truth in small, diluted doses.

Gimme That Showtime Religion

And so church buildings are being constructed like theaters; instead of a pulpit, the focus is a stage. Churches are

hiring full-time media specialists, programming consultants, stage directors, special-effects experts, and choreographers.

Most of the new pragmatists believe the four priorities of the early church—the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42)—make a lame agenda for the church in this day and age. They view our Lord's Great Commission as a marketing manifesto. They believe the church is in business to promote a product, and church leaders, they say, had better pay attention to the methods of Madison Avenue. The church, after all, competes with secular amusements and a host of worldly goods and services. We'll never win people, the pragmatists believe, until we develop effective marketing campaigns to capture their attention and loyalty away from the world's offerings.

One best-selling author has written, "I believe that developing a marketing orientation is precisely what the church needs to do if we are to make a difference in the spiritual health of this nation for the remainder of this century."⁷ He adds, "My contention, based on careful study of data and the activities of American churches, is that the major problem plaguing the Church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment."⁸

What's wrong with this? For one thing, the church has no business marketing its ministry as an alternative to secular amusements (2 Thess. 3:3-4). That corrupts and cheapens the church's real mission. We are not carnival barkers, used car salesmen, or K-Tel pitchmen. We are Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). Knowing the terror of the Lord (v. 11), motivated by the love of Christ (v. 14), utterly made new by Him (v. 17), we implore sinners to be reconciled to God (v. 20).

Moreover, instead of confronting the world with the truth of Christ, the market-driven megachurches are enthu-

siastically promoting the worst trends of secular culture. Feeding people's appetite for entertainment only exacerbates the problems of mindless emotion, apathy and materialism. Quite frankly, it is difficult to conceive of a ministry philosophy more contradictory to the pattern our Lord gave us.

Proclaiming the gospel message of redemption for sinners and expositing the Word for saints should be the heart of every church's ministry. If the world looks at the church and sees an entertainment center, we're sending the wrong message.

Nothing in the Scripture indicates the church should lure people to Christ by presenting Christianity as an attractive option. Nothing about the gospel is optional: "There is salvation in no one else . . . there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Nor is the gospel meant to be attractive in the sense of modern marketing. To most, the message of the gospel is "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (Rom. 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8). There's no way to "market" that. The church must realize that its mission has never been public relations or sales; we are called to declare God's truth—lovingly but uncompromisingly—to an unbelieving world.

Is Numerical Growth a Legitimate Goal?

Lest anyone misunderstand, perhaps I should say that I am no opponent of large churches or of church growth. Grace Community Church was founded more than thirty-five years ago and has experienced tremendous growth through most of its history. On a typical Sunday up to ten thousand people attend our services. We have experienced cycles of growth followed by plateaus. We're currently in another phase of strong growth.

What I oppose is the pragmatism often advocated by church growth specialists who believe they can induce

numerical growth by following whatever techniques seem to be working at the moment. The faddism bred by that philosophy is becoming more and more unruly. It is diverting many churches from biblical priorities, while producing a handful of megachurches whose growth is dependent on their ability to anticipate and respond to the next cultural trend. The church has been drawn away from true revival and is being seduced by those who advocate the *popularization* of Christianity. Tragically, most Christians seem oblivious to the problem, satisfied with a Christianity that is fashionable and highly visible.

Is numerical growth a legitimate goal in church ministry? Certainly no worthy church leader would seriously argue that numerical growth is inherently undesirable. And no one believes that stagnation or numerical decline are to be sought. But is numerical growth always the best gauge of a church's health?

I agree with George Peters, who wrote,

Quantitative growth ... can be deceptive. It may be no more than the mushrooming of a mechanically induced, psychological or social movement, a numerical count, an agglomeration of individuals or groups, an increase of a body without the development of muscle and vital organs. It may be Christendom in the making but not Christianity breaking through. Many mass movements of the past and community and tribal movements have been just that. An example is found in the mass accessions in Europe, particularly in France and Russia, when many were driven to baptism and drawn into the church, resulting in a mass of people professing Christendom but not in a dynamic, vibrant, growing, and responsible church of Jesus Christ. ... It must be admitted ... that to a great extent this expansion of the form, profession, and name of Christendom has little resemblance to the Christianity defined in the New Testament and the church portrayed in the book of Acts.

In many ways the expansion of Christendom has come at the expense of the purity of the gospel and true Christian order and life. The church has become infested with pagan beliefs and practices, and is syncretistic in theology.... Large segments have become Christopagan.⁹

Nothing in Scripture indicates that church leaders should set numerical goals for church growth.¹⁰ Here's how the apostle Paul described the growth process: "I planted, Apollos watered, but *God was causing the growth*. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but *God who causes the growth*" (1 Cor. 3:6-7, emphasis added).

If we concern ourselves with the depth of our ministry, God will see to the breadth of it.

What good, after all, is numerical expansion that is not rooted in commitment to the lordship of Christ? If people come to church primarily because they find it entertaining, they will surely leave as soon as something comes along to amuse them more. And so the church is forced into a hopeless cycle where it must constantly try to eclipse each spectacle with something bigger and better.

The Pragmatic Roots of the Church Growth Movement

Pragmatism as a philosophy of ministry has gained impetus from the church growth movement that has flourished over the past fifty years or so. Donald McGavran, the father of the modern church growth movement, was an unabashed pragmatist:

We devise mission methods and policies in the light of what God has blessed—and what he has obviously not blessed. Industry calls this "modifying operation in light of feedback." Nothing hurts missions overseas so much as continuing methods, institutions, and policies which ought to bring men to Christ—but don't; which ought to multiply churches—but don't. We teach men to be ruthless in regard to method. If it does not work to the glory of God and the extension of

Christ's church, throw it away and get something which does. As to methods, we are fiercely pragmatic—doctrine is something else.¹¹

As a young missionary in India and son of missionary parents, McGavran had noticed that it was not unusual for missions organizations to labor in India for years and have little or no fruit to show for it. McGavran's own agency had planted only twenty or thirty small churches in several decades of missionary work.¹² He determined to devise a strategy of missions that took note of which methods seemed to work and which ones didn't. As he declared in the preface to a book he co-authored in the 1930s, he had dedicated himself to "discarding theories of church growth which do not work, and learning and practicing productive patterns...."¹³

McGavran's pragmatism seems to have been initially prompted by a legitimate concern for stewardship. He "became alarmed when he saw all too many of God's resources—personnel and finances—being used without asking whether the kingdom of God was being advanced by the programs they were supporting."¹⁴ But pragmatism became the philosophical basis for nearly all that McGavran taught, and that in turn set the agenda for the whole church growth movement.

McGavran founded the Institute of Church Growth, which in 1965 united with the Fuller School of World Mission. From there the pragmatic precepts of the church growth movement have reached into virtually every mission field worldwide.

C. Peter Wagner, professor of church growth at the Fuller School of World Mission, is Donald McGavran's best-known student. Wagner is the most prolific if not the most influential spokesman in the church growth movement today. He writes of the movement's inherent pragmatism:

The Church Growth Movement has always stressed pragmatism, and still does even though many have criticized it. It is not the kind of pragmatism that compromises doctrine or ethics or the kind that dehumanizes people by using them as means toward an end. It is, however, the kind of consecrated pragmatism which ruthlessly examines traditional methodologies and programs asking the tough questions. If some sort of ministry in the church is not reaching intended goals, consecrated pragmatism says there is something wrong which needs to be corrected.¹⁵

Wagner, like most in the church growth movement, claims that the "consecrated pragmatism" he advocates does not allow compromise of doctrine or ethics. "The Bible does not allow us to sin that grace may abound or to use whatever means that God has prohibited in order to accomplish those ends He has recommended," he notes correctly.¹⁶

"But with this proviso," Wagner continues, "we ought to see clearly that the end *does* justify the means. What else possibly could justify the means? If the method I am using accomplishes the goal I am aiming at, it is for that reason a good method. If, on the other hand, my method is not accomplishing the goal, how can I be justified in continuing to use it?"¹⁷

Is that true? Certainly not. Especially if "the goal I am aiming at" is a numerical goal with no biblical warrant, or if "my method... not accomplishing the goal" is the clear preaching of God's Word. That is precisely the kind of thinking that is moving biblical exposition out of Christian ministry and replacing it with vaudeville.

One recent best-seller goes even further:

It is ... critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign. If our advertising is 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.¹⁸

What if the Old Testament prophets had subscribed to such a philosophy? Jeremiah, for example, preached forty years without seeing any significant positive response. On the contrary, his countrymen threatened to kill him if he did not stop prophesying (Jer. 11:19-23); his own family and friends plotted against him (12:6); plots were devised to kill him secretly (18:20-23); he was beaten and put in stocks (20:1-2); he was spied on by friends who sought revenge (v.10); he was consumed with sorrow and shame—even cursing the day he was born (vv.14-18); and finally, falsely accused of being a traitor to the nation (37:13-14), Jeremiah was beaten, thrown into a dungeon, and starved many days (vv. 15-21). If an Ethiopian Gentile had not interceded on his behalf, Jeremiah would have died there. In the end, tradition says he was exiled to Egypt, where he was stoned to death by the Jews. He had virtually no converts to show for a lifetime of ministry.

Suppose Jeremiah had attended a church growth seminar and learned a pragmatic philosophy of ministry. Do you think he would have changed his style of confrontational ministry? Can you imagine him staging a variety show or using comedy to try to win people's affections? He may have learned to gather an appreciative crowd, but he certainly would not have had the ministry God called him to do.

The apostle Paul didn't use a system based on merchandising skill, either, though some self-appointed experts have tried to make him a model of the new pragmatism. Reading into the Bible's white space, one advocate of marketing technique asserts, "Paul was one of the all-time great tacticians. He perpetually studied strategies and tactics to identify those that would enable him to attract the most

'prospects' and realize the greatest number of conversions."¹⁹ Of course, the Bible says nothing like that. On the contrary, the apostle Paul shunned clever methods and gimmicks that might proselyte people to false conversions through fleshly persuasion. Paul himself wrote:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

He reminded the churches at Thessalonica,

For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority (1 Thess. 2:3-6).

Biblical truth is the *only* framework by which we can evaluate the rightness or wrongness of ministry methods.

Any end-justifies-the-means philosophy of ministry inevitably will compromise doctrine, despite any proviso to the contrary. If we make effectiveness the gauge of right and wrong, how can that fail to color our doctrine? Ultimately the pragmatist's notion of truth is shaped by what seems effective, not only by the objective revelation of Scripture.

A look at this methodology of the church growth movement shows how this occurs. The movement studies all growing churches—even those with false doctrine at the

core of their teaching. Sometimes Mormon assemblies, Roman Catholic churches, even Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Halls are held up to the specialist's scrutiny. The church growth expert looks for characteristics common to all growing churches and advocates whatever methods seem to work.

Are we to believe that growth in non-Christian congregations is proof that God is at work? Why would we want to duplicate the methodology of religious groups that deny the gospel? Isn't it fair to question whether any growth resulting from such methods is illegitimate, engineered by fleshly means? After all, if a method works as well for a cult as it does for the people of God, there's no reason to assume positive results signify God's blessing.

Utterly missing from most of the church growth literature is any critical analysis of the faulty doctrinal platform on which much contemporary church growth is built. One author has said of Peter Wagner:

Wagner makes negative assessments about nobody. He has made a career out of finding what is good in growing churches, and affirming it—without asking many critical questions. This enables him to hold up as models of church life not only Wimber's Vineyard, but Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, the entire Southern Baptist denomination, and just about any other church that is growing.²⁰

The fact that a church is growing is often mistaken for divine sanction. After all, people reason, why be critical of any teaching that God is blessing with numerical growth? Is it not better to tolerate doctrinal flaws and lapses of orthodoxy for the sake of growth and unity? Thus pragmatism molds and shapes one's doctrinal outlook.

Wagner himself, for example, has embraced the signs and wonders of the Third Wave movement for reasons that are largely pragmatic. He is candid about this:

I am proud to be among those who are advocating power evangelism as an important tool for fulfilling the great commission in our day. One of the reasons I am so enthusiastic is that *it is working*. Across the board, the most effective evangelism in today's world is accompanied by manifestations of supernatural power.²¹

Obviously, then, Wagner's pragmatic perspective has shaped his doctrine, not vice versa.

Wagner virtually concedes this point. He says the methodology of the church growth movement is "phenomenological," not theological. That approach "may appear altogether too subjective to many traditional theologians," he admits.²² He continues, "As a starting point, church growth often looks to the 'is' previous to the 'ought.'... What Christians experience about God's work in the world and in their lives is not always preceded by careful theological rationalizations. Many times the sequence is just the opposite: theology is shaped by Christian experience."²³

That being the case, isn't Wagner's assertion that his pragmatism "is not the kind... that compromises doctrine"²⁴ rendered meaningless? After all, if experience suggests signs and wonders are effective tools for church growth, and if it is legitimate to allow our experience to shape our theology, it is quite logical to amend one's doctrine—as Wagner himself did—to accommodate some pragmatic, heuristic observation.

It is folly to think that one can be both pragmatic *and* biblical. The pragmatist wants to know *what works now*. The biblical thinker cares only about *what the Bible says*. The two philosophies inevitably oppose each at the most basic level.

The Age of Pragmatism

Nevertheless, philosophical pragmatism has never been more popular in evangelical churches. The church growth movement, which for years was a major factor in world

missionary activity, is now having enormous influence in the backyard of Western evangelicalism. North American churches by the hundreds are experimenting with pragmatic methodologies, and the result has been an explosion of interest in innovative church growth techniques. The church growth movement has formed an unofficial alliance with those who believe evangelism is primarily a marketing venture.

Pragmatism in the church reflects the spirit of our age. Books with titles like *Marketing Your Ministry*, *Marketing the Church*, and *The Development of Effective Marketing and Communication Strategies for Churches* are all the rage. The Christian publishing industry is now producing more advice for church leaders drawn from secular fields of study—psychology, marketing, management, politics, entertainment, and business—than all the commentaries, Bible study helps, and books on biblical issues put together.

The role model for contemporary pastors is not the prophet or the shepherd—it is the corporate executive or the politician. The contemporary church is preoccupied with corporate image, statistical growth, financial profit, opinion polls, demographic charts, census figures, and other pragmatic issues. Gone is the church's passion for purity and truth. No one seems to care, as long as the response is enthusiastic.

Tozer noticed that pragmatism had crept into the church of his day, too. He wrote, "I say without hesitation that a part, a very large part, of the activities carried on today in evangelical circles are not only influenced by pragmatism but almost completely controlled by it."²⁵ Tozer described the danger posed to the church by even so-called "consecrated" pragmatism:

The pragmatic philosophy ... asks no embarrassing questions about the wisdom of what we are doing or even about the

morality of it. It accepts our chosen ends as right and good and casts about for efficient means and ways to get them accomplished. When it discovers something that works it soon finds a text to justify it, "consecrates" it to the Lord and plunges ahead. Next a magazine article is written about it, then a book, and finally the inventor is granted an honorary degree. After that any question about the scripturalness of things or even the moral validity of them is completely swept away. You cannot argue with success. The method works; ergo, it must be good.²⁶

User-Friendly Churches

Now the experts are touting the concept of the "user-friendly church."²⁷ Borrowing a term from the high-tech industries, church growth specialists are advocating a new approach to church ministry. Church growth can be accelerated, they say, if pastors and church leaders will concentrate their energies on making the church as non-threatening as possible for the unchurched. Provide non-Christians with an agreeable, inoffensive environment. Give them freedom, tolerance, and anonymity. Always be positive and benevolent. If you must have a sermon, keep it brief and amusing. Don't be preachy or authoritative. Above all, keep everyone entertained. Churches following this pattern will see numerical growth, we're assured; those that ignore it are doomed to decline.

Do you see how that philosophy necessarily undermines sound doctrine? It discards Jesus' own methods—preaching and teaching—as the primary means of ministry. It replaces them with methodologies utterly devoid of substance. It exists independently of any creed or canon. In fact, it eschews dogma or strong convictions as divisive, unbecoming, or inappropriate. It dismisses doctrine as academic, abstract, sterile, threatening, or simply impractical. Rather than teaching error or denying truth, it does something far more subtle, but just as effective from the enemy's point of view. It jettisons content altogether. In-

stead of attacking orthodoxy head on, it gives lip service to the truth while quietly undermining the foundations of doctrine. Instead of exalting God, it denigrates the things that are precious to Him. In that regard, pragmatism poses dangers more subtle than the liberalism that threatened the church in the first half of the century.

A major Christian magazine recently published an article by a well-known charismatic speaker. He mused for a full page about the futility of both preaching and listening to sermons that go beyond mere entertainment. His conclusion? People don't remember what you say anyway, so most preaching is a waste of time. "I'm going to try to do better next year," he writes; "that means wasting less time listening to long sermons and spending more time preparing short ones. People, I've discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out before noon."²⁸

That perfectly sums up the attitude that dominates much of modern ministry. It is sheer accommodation to a society addicted to entertainment. It follows what is fashionable but reveals little concern for what is true.

A recent best-selling Christian book warns readers to be on guard against preachers whose emphasis is on *interpreting* Scripture rather than *applying* it.

Wait a minute. Is that wise counsel? No, it is not. There is no danger of irrelevant doctrine; the real threat is an undoctrinal attempt at relevance. The nucleus of all that is truly practical is found in the teaching of Scripture. We don't *make* the Bible relevant; it is inherently so, simply because it is God's Word. And after all, how can *anything* God says be irrelevant (2 Tim. 3:16-17)?

The radical pragmatism of the "user-friendly" school of thought robs the church of its prophetic role. It makes the church a populist organization, recruiting members by providing them a warm and friendly atmosphere in which to eat, drink, and be entertained. The church becomes more

like a saloon than a house of worship.

That is no overstatement. One recent best-selling book advocating pragmatic church growth ideas included this suggestion:

Remember how the corner tavern used to be the place where the men of the neighborhood would congregate to watch major sports events, like the World Series or championship boxing matches? While times have changed, that same concept can still be used to great impact by the Church. Most churches have a large hall or auditorium which could be used for special gatherings built around major media events—sports, political debates, entertainment specials and the like.²⁹

That entire scenario is built on a set of presuppositions that are patently unbiblical. The church is not a lodge recruiting members. It is not a pub for the neighborhood. It is not a frat house enlisting pledges. It is not a community center where parties are held. It is not a country club for the masses. It is not a city precinct meeting where the community's problems are addressed. It is not a court to rectify society's injustices. It is not an open forum, or a political convention, or even an evangelical rally.

The church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), and church meetings are for corporate worship and instruction. The church's only legitimate goal is "the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12)—not mere numerical expansion. The notion that church meetings should be used to tantalize or convert non-Christians is a relatively recent development. Nothing like it is found in Scripture; in fact, the apostle Paul spoke of unbelievers entering the assembly as an exceptional event (1 Cor. 14:23). Hebrews 10:24-25 indicates that church services are for the benefit of believers, not unbelievers: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to

love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together.”

Acts 2:42 shows us the pattern the early church followed when they met: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Note that the early church’s priorities clearly were to worship God and uplift the brethren. The church came together for worship and edification; it scattered to evangelize the world.

Our Lord commissioned His disciples for evangelism in this way: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Christ makes it clear that the church is not to wait for or invite the world to come to its meetings, but to go to the world. That is every believer’s responsibility. I fear that an approach emphasizing a palatable gospel presentation within the walls of the church absolves the individual believer from his personal obligation to be a light in the world (Matt. 5:16).

The preaching of God’s Word is to be central in the church (1 Cor. 1:23; 9:16; 2 Cor. 4:5; 1 Tim. 6:2; 2 Tim. 4:2). “In season and out of season,” it is the task of God’s ministers to “reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). The pastor who sets entertainment above forceful preaching abdicates the primary responsibility of an elder: “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

I’ve often been curious about how advocates of user-friendly methodology deal with the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. They lied, so God struck them both dead in front of the entire Jerusalem church. Acts 5:11 says, “Great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.” It’s hard to reconcile that with the concept of user-friendly church. Yet the early church con-

tinued to grow exponentially. Verse 14 goes on to say, “All the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.”

The church’s strategy has never been to appeal to the world on the world’s terms. Churches aren’t supposed to compete for the consumer on the same level as Miller Lite or MTV. We can’t stimulate genuine growth by clever persuasion or inventive techniques. It is the Lord who adds to the church (Acts 2:47). Human methodologies cannot accelerate or supersede the divine process. Any additional growth they produce is a barren imitation.

Artificial or unnatural growth in the biological realm can cause disfigurement—or worse, cancer. Synthetic growth in the spiritual realm is every bit as unhealthy.

Good Technique? No, Bad Theology

The philosophy that marries marketing technique with church growth theory is the result of bad theology. It assumes that if you package the gospel right, people will get saved. The whole approach is rooted in Arminian theology. It views conversion as nothing more than an act of the human will. Its goal is an instantaneous decision rather than a radical change of the heart.

Moreover, this ad-agency approach to the church corrupts Christianity and caters to the fleshly lusts that are woven into the very fabric of this world’s system (1 John 2:14). We have a society filled with people who want what they want when they want it. They are into their own lifestyle, recreation, and entertainment. When churches appeal to those selfish desires, they only fuel fires that hinder true godliness.

The church has accommodated our culture by devising a brand of Christianity where taking up one’s cross is optional—or even unseemingly. Indeed, many members of the church in the Western world suppose they can best

serve God by being as nonconfrontive to their world as possible.

Having absorbed the world's values, Christianity in our society is now dying. Subtly but surely, worldliness and self-indulgence are eating away at the heart of the church. The gospel usually proclaimed today is so convoluted that it offers believing in Christ as nothing more than a means to contentment and prosperity. The offense of the cross (cf. Gal. 5:11) has been systematically removed so that the message might be made more acceptable to unbelievers. The church somehow got the idea it could declare peace with the enemies of God.

When on top of that, punk-rockers, ventriloquists' dummies, clowns, knife-throwers, professional wrestlers, weightlifters, bodybuilders, comedians, dancers, jugglers, rapmasters, and show-business celebrities take the place of the preacher, the gospel is dealt a catastrophic blow. "How shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14).

I believe we can be innovative and creative in how we present the gospel, but we have to be careful to harmonize our methods with the profound spiritual truth we are trying to convey. It is too easy to trivialize the sacred message.

Don't be quick to embrace the trends of the high-tech megachurches. And don't sneer at conventional worship and preaching. We don't need clever approaches to get people saved (1 Cor. 1:21). We simply need to get back to preaching the truth and planting the seed. If we're faithful in that, the soil God has prepared will bear fruit.

But if the church in America does not get back to biblical Christianity, we will soon see the end of our influence for Christ. Everyone is astonished to see how rapidly the face of the modern world is changing. What few Christians seem to realize is how frighteningly fast the church is declining at the same time. We may be witnessing the last days of biblical evangelicalism in our nation. It is not really far

fetched to imagine that ten years hence, missionaries from Romania might be evangelizing America.

The reality of that possibility greatly alarms me. We who know and love the truth must be the prophetic voice of our God and affirm the holiness of His name. We must demand that any effort in the name of our Lord manifest the integrity of His nature. He is holy, holy, holy (Isa. 6:3) and must be so represented. Anything less is not worthy of our Lord's majesty, awesomeness, and holiness.

The challenge for Christ's church is this: "Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). It isn't the cleverness of our methods, the techniques of our ministry, or the wit of our sermons that put power in our testimony. It is obedience to a holy God and faithfulness to His holiness in our daily lives.

We must wake up. The cold war may be over, but the spiritual battle rages on. We cannot afford to be indifferent. We cannot continue our mad pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification. We are called to fight a spiritual battle, and we cannot win by appeasing the enemy. A needy world must be confronted with the message of salvation, and there may be little time left. As Paul wrote to the church at Rome:

It is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light (Rom. 13:11-12).

- 1 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 63.
- 2 A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1955), 32-33.
- 3 R. Gustav Niebuhr, "Mighty Fortresses: Megachurches Strive to Be All Things to All Parishioners," *The Wall Street Journal* (13 May 1991), A:6.
- 4 Robert Johnson, "Heavenly Gifts: Preaching a Gospel of Acquisitiveness, a Showy Sect Prospers," *The Wall Street Journal* (11 Dec. 1990), A:1-8.
- 5 *Ibid.*, A:8.
- 6 For a further discussion of the dangers of pragmatism, see John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 113-65.
- 7 George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1988), 13.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 9 George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 23-24.
- 10 cf. C. Peter Wagner, ed. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Third ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 265-81. Here Wagner and McGavran argue that "numerical goal setting is in accordance with God's eternal purpose. Goal setting in the service of the Great Commission is pleasing to God.... Scripture is solidly on the side of careful planning for church growth" (p. 270). The only passage of Scripture they cite in support of that statement is Acts 18:4-5, 9, which says nothing about the setting of goals, numerical or otherwise.
- 11 Donald McGavran, "For Such a Time As This," (unpublished address, 1970), cited in C. Peter Wagner, "Pragmatic Strategy for Tomorrow's Mission," in A. R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 147.

- 12 Wagner, ed., *Understanding Church Growth*, viii-ix.
- 13 *Ibid.*, ix.
- 14 *Ibid.*, ix.
- 15 C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), 201.
- 16 C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1976), 160-61.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 161 (emphasis in original).
- 18 Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 145.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 31-32.
- 20 Tim Stafford, "Testing the Wine from John Wimber's Vineyard," *Christianity Today* (8 August, 1986), 18.
- 21 C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Vine, 1988), 87.
- 22 C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1986), 33.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, 201.
- 25 A. W. Tozer, *God Tells the Man Who Cares* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1970), 71.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 27 George Barna, *User Friendly Churches* (Ventura, California, 1991).
- 28 Jamie Buckingham, "Wasted Time," *Charisma*, (December 1988), 98.
- 29 George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1990), 94-95.

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