

Think on These Things

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What's Driving the Creekers?

A Look Behind the Scenes of the Market-Driven Church, Pt. 1

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At the first tee, with great optimism and hope, I take a mighty cut at my Top Flight #2. I eagerly look up, fully expecting to watch that little white ball soar 250 yards straight up the fairway, only to find that I have hooked it into the woods on the left. Determined not to repeat such an "uncharacteristic" performance, I correct my swing a bit at the second tee only to slice the ball into the water on the right. By the third hole, I'm sure, I have all the bugs worked out. Taking a swing that Tiger Woods would envy, and that blows leaves off trees fifty yards away, I am amazed to find that I have topped the ball, causing it to dribble harmlessly almost to the ladies' tee about twenty-five yards away. Frustrated, fully humbled, and deciding that keeping score would be a bad idea this round, I slump to the next tee. With no expectations and few hopes I leisurely drive the ball. To my utter amazement it is straight and long. Ah, I am back to form, I surmise. I am myself again — until the next shot. Oh, the joy of golf. And I took this game up to relax!?

The church, as observed throughout its history, reminds me a lot of my golf swing. She is constantly going from one extreme to the next, over correcting, coming up short, searching, and frustrated. Occasionally she gets it right and drives one down the middle, but repeating that feat is rare and soon she is slicing again.

Take the church growth movement for example. Having watched a large segment of the church become content with short yardage and lousy scores, some decided that there had to be a better way. The church was not penetrating society; she was not pulling in the masses; she was not making a significant impact for the gospel. It was

not that the church leaders didn't care, it was, it seemed, that they lacked the "know-how," the tools, to effect change. The gospel was still "the power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16), but it was being rejected out-of-hand by too many. What was needed, apparently, were new methods to reach the lost, new techniques to promote the church, new packages for the gospel message. People, we were told, were not rejecting the gospel or Christ; they were rejecting our out-of-date, unappetizing forms, philosophies, and methods.

It is these pronouncements that we want to examine together. We will say up front that the church growth (or market-driven, or seeker-sensitive) experts have gotten some things right. They are calling for excellence rather than shabbiness; aggressive evangelism rather than indifference; direction and purpose rather than aimless-ness; innovation and creativity rather than traditionalism; dedication rather than slothfulness. In all of these things we commend them. On the other hand, much like my golf swing, they have over corrected in important areas. These areas demand careful probing and biblical realignment.

While we will examine the writing of various individuals who speak for the market-driven movement, we will focus often on the two flagship churches: Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, and Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago. These churches serve as the models that are reshaping the way we "do church" today. As a matter of fact, many refer to these churches and their clones as "new paradigm churches." Churches all over the world, even those who would claim to

reject the church growth movement, are imitating the many methods promoted by Saddleback and the “Creekers.” Others have written about church growth, but these two churches have made it work, and for their success they are idolized and adored by the modern evangelical community.

The New Paradigm

There are numerous things about the market-driven church growth movement that are disturbing, and we will examine these in detail later in other papers. However, at this point we need to ask some questions: What exactly is a new paradigm church? How do they work? How do they differ from more traditional churches? What are they doing right? Why are they growing? And what can we learn from them?

First, we must distinguish between megachurches and new paradigm churches. Megachurches are defined as those with average worship attendance of 2000 or more, but these behemoth churches come in all shapes, stripes and forms. Some are centers of great preaching and teaching, some are charismatic, others are little more than social clubs. New paradigm churches, on the other hand, are identified by a philosophy of ministry intentionally designed to effect numerical growth. In their church growth methodologies more attention is paid to market strategy, business techniques and demographics than to New Testament instruction. This is not a criticism at this point (although we will critique these tactics later), simply an observation. Read the leading literature from the pens of the church growth experts (e.g. *The Purpose Driven Church*, by Rick Warren of Saddleback; *Marketing the Church*, by George Barna and *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry*, by Lee Strobel) and you will find bucket loads of marketing techniques and only passing references to the book of Acts (the divinely inspired church growth manual) or any other Scripture for that matter.

An interesting article, just the type that shapes the new paradigm system, is found in *American Demographics* magazine (*American Demographics*, April 1999, “Choosing My Religion,” pp. 60-65, by Richard Cimino and Don Lattin). Several statements from the article are worth quoting since *American Demographic* seems to have its finger on the pulse

of Americans’ wants and desires. According to this article people today claim they are:

into spirituality, not religion. . . Behind this shift is the search for an experiential faith, a religion of the heart, not the head. It’s a religious expression that downplays doctrine and dogma, and revels in direct experience of the divine — whether it’s called the “Holy Spirit” or “cosmic consciousness” or the “true self.” It is practical and personal, more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological. It’s about feeling good, not being good. It’s as much about the body as the soul. . . Some marketing gurus have begun calling it “the experience industry” (Ibid., p. 62).

“Congregants,” the authors believe, “care as much about a church’s childcare services as its doctrinal purity, pay more attention to the style of music than the pastor’s theological training” (ibid.). If these things are true, how should the church react? Church marketing consultant Richard Southern encourages us to have “an essential paradigm shift in the way church is done, putting the needs of potential customers before the needs of the institutional church. Baby boomers [the inevitable target of new paradigm churches] think of churches like they think of supermarkets, they want options, choices, and convenience. . . . Numerous surveys show that Americans are as religious as ever — perhaps more than ever. . . . But what is on the decline is Americans’ loyalty to particular denominations or traditions. . . . In 1958 only 1 in 25 Americans had left the religious denomination of their upbringing. Today, more than 1 in 2 have left or switched. . . . Protestant megachurches have become the evangelical answer to Home Depot, marketing such services as worship, child care, a sports club, 12-step groups, and a guaranteed parking place” (ibid., p. 63).

The natural outcome of church leaders, who pour over such literature, is that they begin to use, “computerized demographic studies and other sophisticated marketing techniques to fill their pews” (ibid., p. 62). And the good news is that it does not matter what a given church believes, for “anyone can learn these marketing and outreach techniques. You don’t have to change your theology or your political stance” (ibid.). Springing from this fountain of

demographic “truth” is a whole industry of experts to teach church marketing techniques. One such expert is Christian A. Schwarz, who is the director of the Institute for Natural Church Development. Schwarz claims that between 1994 and 1996 his organization conducted “the most comprehensive research project about the causes of church growth that has ever been conducted in the Christian church. . . More than 1000 churches on all five continents took part in this study” (*The ABC’s of Natural Church Development*, by Christian A. Schwarz).

From this mountain of research Schwarz has observed eight characteristics of growing churches. These are: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism and loving relationships. Some of these qualities we will examine more closely later, but at this juncture there are two things that draw our interest. Schwarz claims that these principles work in any type of church anywhere in the world, and secondly, that if all characteristics are present these principles **will work every time**. “Every church in which each of the eight quality characteristics has reached a certain level. . . is a growing church. There is qualitative value — which can be shown in exact statistical terms — beyond which a church will always grow” (ibid., p. 23).

One quality especially important to today’s growing churches is enthusiastic worship services. Schwarz asks his readers, “Is the worship service an inspiring experience for those who attend it? It is this area that clearly separates growing from non-growing churches. People who attend inspiring worship services unanimously declare that the church service is — and for some Christians this is almost a heretical word — ‘fun’” (ibid., p. 14).

Growing churches are creating an atmosphere, an environment of fun. So fun has replaced holiness as the church’s goal. Having a good time has become the criterion of an excellent, growing church, since fun and entertainment is what church consumers want. Yet Scripture references encouraging churches to become havens of fun are, as one may suspect, sadly lacking.

Let’s play “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” For \$500,000: Which church was a growing church in the book of Revelation; the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22), which

saw itself as rich and wealthy and in need of nothing; or the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11), that was described as poor, in tribulation and facing great persecution? Need a “lifeline” you say? Here you go: God said of the Laodicean church that He would spit them out of His mouth, but of the Smyrna church that they would receive the crown of life. Confusing, isn’t it? The obviously growing church did not please God, while the struggling one did. This is something worth pondering as we press on.

Who’s the Leader of Our Gang?

Trying to identify new paradigm churches, as far as doctrine or denomination is concerned, is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall — it is a slippery proposition at best, and impossible at worst. They must be identified on the basis of philosophy of church growth, as outlined above. Setting the agenda for new paradigm churches is Willow Creek and their quasi-denomination, the Willow Creek Association. The WCA is a loose association of hundreds of churches that have shown an interest in the method and philosophy of church growth as espoused by Willow Creek Community Church. All members of WCA claim to be evangelical, but are as diverse as Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal. In many communities, including ours, both evangelical and liberal churches are members of the WCA. The new paradigm churches are united not by doctrine but by philosophy, a philosophy based on market-driven principles.

But is a market-driven church so bad? After all, a lot of people seem to be getting saved and they’re really “packing ‘em in.” Rick Warren puts a positive spin on new paradigm philosophy in his very popular book *The Purpose-Driven Church*. Describing the ministry of Saddleback Valley Community Church, Warren ably demonstrates that many church growth principles are simply commonsense on the one hand and purposeful, aggressive leadership on the other. Many of Warren’s suggestions are excellent. Churches should pay attention to cleanliness and attractiveness, where people are going to park and how new people are going to feel walking through our doors. We should strive for excellence and do our best to communicate God’s truth. And we should want to grow — in the right

ways. Warren states, "Every church needs to grow warmer through fellowship, deeper through discipleship, stronger through worship, broader through ministry, and larger through evangelism" (*The Purpose-Driven Church*, by Rick Warren, p. 48).

Who could argue with that? And who would debate the need for churches to know why they exist (their purpose), channeling their energies in that direction rather than wandering aimlessly as many do? And what about evangelism? Warren and the new paradigm churches are geared to reaching the lost. While many churches are wasting precious energy fussing over the color of the drapes in the foyer, the Saddlebacks and Willow Creeks are focusing their attention on bringing unchurched Harry and Saddleback Sam to Christ. You can't help but admire that kind of emphasis. To this end, Willow Creek, in particular, has made it a passion to understand the unsaved around them (unchurched Harry and Mary) in order to more effectively communicate the gospel.

Willow Creekers know Harry's interests and passions, his goals and his hang-ups. They understand how his mind works and are doing all they can to make Christianity relevant. Churches that are growing are doing so primarily because they are focusing attention on the lost and visitors. They are churches that have not become in-grown and comfortable. None of these things are wrong; the problems are in the details. Having detoured around the Bible, the new paradigm churches often look to other sources to develop their systems. Perhaps no single source carries as much weight in the "seeker-sensitive" church than George Barna and his Barna Research Group. Barna, the church counterpart to George Gallup, has ignited a number of fires in Christian circles with his books such as *The Frog in the Kettle* and *Marketing the Church*. In his more recent book *Church Marketing, Breaking Ground for the Harvest*, Barna declared that he, and his types, have won the ideological battle over the issue of marketing the church (p. 13,14). That is, only a few old-fashioned stick-in-the-muds still question the validity of the market-driven strategy. Marketing, by the way, is defined by Barna as "a broad term that encompasses all the activities that lead up to an exchange of equally valued goods between consenting parties."

In other words, "activities such as advertising, public

relations, strategic planning, audience research, product distribution, fund-raising and product pricing, developing a vision statement, and customer service are all elements of marketing. When these elements are combined in a transaction in which the parties involved exchange items of equivalent worth, the marketing act has been consummated" (p. 19).

Barna assures us that churches sell (or market) their product the same way Wal-Mart sells shoes and Sears sells tools. But what is the church's product? What are we trying to peddle to consumers? This has to be thought through carefully, for unlike shoes and tools that have great attraction for some consumers, the gospel is repulsive, foolishness, to the unsaved (I Corinthians 1:18-23).

How do we market such a product? By changing the package. Note the subtle bait and switch in Barna's philosophy,

Ministry, in essence, has the same objective as marketing — to meet people's needs. Christian ministry, by definition, meets people's real needs by providing them with biblical solutions to their life circumstances (p. 21).

By repackaging ministry, including the gospel message, as we will see, Barna has made it attractive. If we can convince people that Christ died to meet their needs, they will line up at our doors to buy our product. But is this the gospel message? Has Barna merely repackaged, prettied up, the gospel "product" or has he gutted it of its purpose and value? An important question upon which so much hinges — a question worthy of much consideration in our future papers.

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