

MARKET-DRIVEN MINISTRY: BLESSING OR CURSE?†

Part One

by
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Dr. William R. Rice was pastor of the Inter-City Baptist Church from 1949–1989. Over the course of those forty years, God’s grace was evident upon his life and ministry. From a struggling congregation of less than ninety, Dr. Rice led the church through enormous growth, ultimately reaching an average attendance of 1,500. He also started a Christian pre-school and day school, bookstore, retirement home, and Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. Only eternity will reveal the impact of Dr. and Mrs. Rice’s surrender to the Lord’s will. It was under Dr. Rice’s ministry that I trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior and was baptized, graduated from the Christian school, served in my first pastoral staff ministry, was married, received my seminary education, and was mentored for my present place of ministry. I thank God for the privilege of growing up physically and spiritually under his ministry. Few pastors have combined the aggressive leadership and commitment to Scripture that characterized Dr. Rice. He was never afraid to be innovative and industrious in the pursuit of church growth, yet he was never willing to compromise God’s Word or slacken his commitment to expositional preaching.

It is precisely for those reasons, Dr. Rice’s aggressive and undivided commitment to church growth, holiness, and preaching, that this article is dedicated to him. Unfortunately, there are prevalent philosophies about church growth that ignore these last two commitments. The marketing movement is one of the newest and fastest growing of these. The widespread acceptance of the marketing philosophy and the aggressiveness with which it is being promoted, makes it necessary that pastors and other ministry leaders become aware of its principles and practices.

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The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the rationale behind the movement, the basic principles upon which a marketing approach is built, and the methods employed in marketing. This essay will also begin to critique the marketing movement by examining its practical and biblical arguments for the adoption of a marketing orientation. A second essay, appearing in the next issue of the *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, will deal fully with the philosophy that undergirds the marketing approach to ministry.

Proper assessment of the marketing movement demands that we gain a thorough appreciation of its principles. It is undeniable that the marketing concepts currently being promoted among the church growth movement often arouse strong negative reactions.¹ Obviously, such strong reactions must be grounded in an accurate assessment of the movement or the reactions will be no more biblical than the movement that precipitated them.

THE IMPETUS FOR THE MARKETING MOVEMENT

Before we examine the content of the marketing philosophy, it will be helpful to understand the motivation behind it. Those who are advocating a marketing philosophy are genuinely committed to the rightness and absolute necessity of adopting this approach to ministry—marketing, for them, is not an optional matter. The following are common reasons given for adopting a marketing approach to ministry.

Marketing Is Essential for Church Growth

Since the marketing movement is most closely aligned with the church growth movement,² it should not surprise us to find dogmatic statements regarding the absolute need for marketing if churches are to grow properly. George Barna fearlessly leads the charge, “*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 mar-*

¹The titles of three popular rebuttals of the marketing philosophy evidence the strength of the negative reactions: John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993); Douglas Webster, *Selling Jesus: What’s Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992); and Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993).

²Though there may seem to be no distinction between the market-driven and church growth movements, not all who advocate marketing claim to be proponents of the church growth movement, e.g., Norman Shawchuck, Philip Kotler, Bruce Wrenn, and Gustave Rath (*Marketing for Congregations* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1992], p. 32).

keting orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment"³

This is a dramatic claim which resonates with the confidence of someone who has discovered a new way of viewing ministry that is the key to unparalleled success. What is this new paradigm for ministry? Barna explains more clearly,

The Church is a business. It is involved in the business of ministry. As such, the local church must be run with the same wisdom and savvy that characterizes any for-profit business....Our goal as a church, like any secular business, is to turn a profit. For us, however, profit means saving souls and nurturing believers.⁴

This new ministry paradigm carries with it the implicit demand that this business, the church, be administered and promoted like any other business. It is virtually inconceivable that a business would seek success without adopting some form of marketing stance; therefore, marketing is absolutely necessary for ministry success, which is almost universally defined within market-driven circles as church growth.

Marketing Is Essential for Pastoral Effectiveness

This new ministry paradigm for the church requires radical alteration of the traditional concept of the pastor's work and ministry. If the church is a business and marketing is essential to make that business a success, then the pastor must possess, or quickly gain, proficiency in managerial skills related to the marketing task. Most pastors have been sorely prepared for this type of task, and the marketers believe this is a critical flaw in the current pastoral training process.

The average pastor has been trained in religious matters. Yet, upon assuming church leadership, he is asked to run a business! Granted, that business is a not-for-profit organization, but still it is a business....For the local church to be a successful business, it must impact a growing share of its market area.⁵

This paradigm shift is a frontal assault on the standard conception of pastoral effectiveness:

Ultimately, many people do judge the pastor not on his ability to preach, teach, or counsel, but on his capacity to make the church run smoothly and efficiently. In essence, he is judged as a businessman....He must be a good enough businessman to keep the church solvent and make it appealing enough for people to attend before he has the chance to impact their

³George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), p. 23.

⁴Ibid., p. 26.

⁵Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 14.

lives.⁶

While it is possible, if not probable, that one should concede the accuracy of Barna's observation—that pastors are judged more by business standards than ability to preach, teach and counsel—the real question is whether this is acceptable. The existence of this perception does not validate it. The deeper issue is whether this assessment, which Barna believes to be common, is the one that matters to God.

Sadly, the marketing mindset is ill-equipped to confront misinformed perceptions; it can only accommodate them. The net impact of this paradigm shift is the call from the church growth and marketing advocates to shift pastoral training away from a theological, Bible-related orientation to a practical, ministry-related orientation.

Traditional seminary education is designed to train research theologians, who are to become parish practitioners. Probably they are adequately prepared for neither.

Already we have seen an enormous switch from the traditional Master of Divinity degree to various Master of Arts degrees offered by seminaries. I believe we are on the front end of a long-term trend. We will see more and more students choosing either academic scholarship (the theologians) or parish practice (the pastors).

The institutions will change. They must. Few schools have resources to train both. We will need comparatively few graduate schools of theology and comparatively more schools of professional ministry. Both must move away from the traditional notion of education being time and place, but this switch must especially apply to the preparation of practitioners. They want to be (and the church wants) men and women who can *do* something, not know everything.⁷

The dichotomy forced into this equation, theology versus ministry, is the result of the marketing mindset's business orientation.⁸ The marketing movement's opinion seems to be obvious—theology is not very marketable; meeting felt-needs is. Since the pastor is evaluated on success, that is, reaching an expanding portion of the market, his training

⁶Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 14.

⁷Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992), pp. 46–47.

⁸Portions of the new evangelical community are also reacting strongly to this false dichotomy; cf. David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), especially chapter six. Fundamentalists have often been guilty of advocating this same erroneous dichotomy. The abundance of non-theologically oriented ministry degrees cropping up at fundamentalist schools ought to cause serious concern. What may have begun with good intentions, namely the on-going training for people already in ministry, is developing into a wholesale substitution for the necessary grounding in Scripture, theology, and the biblical languages.

had better focus on the relevant matter of marketing techniques.

Marketing Is Essential to Minister Within the Contemporary Culture

Advocates of a marketing approach to ministry suggest that many cultural factors weigh heavily in favor of adopting this ministry philosophy. The arguments range from overly simplistic generalizations about baby boomers, that group of Americans whose birth dates range from 1946–1964, to semi-technical analyses of the social environment. The over-simplified approach is typified by Doug Murren: “American Christianity is dominated by our parents’ generation. And we boomers, despite our desire to return to a real spiritual experience, are unable to relate to a church culture dominated by our parents.”⁹ The assumption, merely stated but never proven, is that seventy million baby boomers agree with him.

Those marketing advocates who tie their arguments to more technical descriptions of cultural developments often provide a better case for their position. These arguments include sociological issues (secularization, anomie, changing demographics), market factors (increasing competition, scarcity of resources, rising costs of operations, scandals among religious organizations), and religious trends (privatization of faith, erosion of ideologies, consumerist approaches to religion).¹⁰ The reality of these changes probably cannot be denied, but it seems open to challenge: (1) whether developing a marketing orientation is the necessary, or even most beneficial, response to them; and (2) whether these are unparalleled in previous cultures in which the Gospel ministry was very effective in calling people to Christ.¹¹ With regard to the first issue, it is certain that the Apostle Paul did not opt for an approach to ministry that incorporated man’s wisdom or sought acceptance with those who did not know Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–2:5). Ironically, the marketing approach, while recognizing the consumerist tendencies of modern America,¹² actually uses this observation to argue

⁹*The Baby Boomerang* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), p. 35.

¹⁰Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 27–29.

¹¹A realistic appraisal of the environment within which the early church ministered reveals that they faced many of these same societal conditions (see Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970], especially chapters one and two).

¹²For instance, the authors of *Marketing for Congregations* write, “People no longer believe church or synagogue attendance is essential to their faith. Surveys in 1988 revealed that nationally 76 percent of American adults felt a person could be a good Christian or Jew without attending church or synagogue. This percentage was even higher among those aged 15–29 (84 percent) or in those living in the West (83 percent). Also, 42 percent of the people said that there has been a period of two years or more

for an approach to ministry which caters to, rather than confronts, such consumerism.

Marketing Principles Follow the Pattern of Jesus Christ

Perhaps the boldest claim is that the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ serves as an example of their current philosophy and practices. For instance, Barna claims,

Jesus Christ was a communications specialist. He communicated His message in diverse ways, and with results, that would be a credit to modern advertising and marketing agencies. Notice the Lord's approach: he identified His target audience, determined their need, and delivered His message directly to them. By addressing the crowds on the mountain-side, or the Jews in the Temple, he promoted His product in the most efficient way possible: by communicating with the "hot prospects."¹³

Once this incredibly anachronistic statement is given serious consideration, its premises not only fall to the ground, but come hauntingly close to being sacrilegious.

Barna's assessment of the effectiveness of Christ's communications methods falls short on several fronts. First, the "success" that the marketers so patently pursue was not attained by Jesus of Nazareth—at the conclusion of His earthly ministry He was left with only a handful of followers. Second, rather than approach the communications process from the "sales" perspective implied in Barna's statements, Jesus often delivered His message in a manner which drove away the so-called "hot prospects" (cf. John 6:60–67). Even the parables, in spite of modern attempts to classify them as tremendous teaching tools, were deliberately used by Jesus to drive away those who did not have faith (Matt 13:10–11). This is anything but a "user-friendly" approach to ministry. And, third, the authoritative stance of Jesus's proclamations find no parallel in either secular or religious marketing. To the contrary, the core of marketing philosophy operates within a framework of thinking which is quite different from Christ's. The market advocates readily concede that "marketing is a democratic, rather than elitist, technology. It holds that efforts that try to impose a product on a market are likely to fail if the market perceives that the product, service, or idea is not matched to its needs or wants."¹⁴ But when Jesus the Messiah burst on the religious

when they did not attend church or synagogue apart from weddings, funerals, or special holidays such as Christmas, Easter, or Yom Kippur" (p. 29).

¹³Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 32.

¹⁴Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 47.

scene with the words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” it could not be remotely compared to contemporary marketing strategies.

While the apparent motivations which drive the marketing movement are admirable, good intention alone is not sufficient justification for the use of marketing techniques. Our methods must always be subservient to our mission; therefore, we must carefully examine the meaning and methods of marketing.

THE INGREDIENTS OF A MARKETING ORIENTATION

To evaluate properly the marketing approach to ministry we must understand its foundational principles and practices. This section will focus on the meaning and practices of marketing as developed within the secular world and then applied to the ministry context.

The Definition of Marketing

For those who have no training in marketing, the first step in evaluating this new approach to ministry is to ask the basic question, what is it? For purposes of clarity, and objectivity, it is best to allow the proponents of marketing, both secular and religious, to answer for themselves.

Marketing is the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from the producer to the consumer, to satisfy the needs and desires of the consumer *and* the goals and objectives of the producer.¹⁵

For now, think of marketing as the activities that allow you, as a church, to identify and understand people’s needs, identify your resources and capabilities, and to engage in a course of action that will enable you to use your resources and capabilities to satisfy the needs of the people to whom you wish to minister. Marketing is the process by which you seek to apply your product to the desires of the target population.¹⁶

Marketing is the analysis, planning, staffing, implementation and control of programs composed of various controllable activities to bring about exchanges with target markets in order to satisfy these target markets and accomplish the objectives of the ministry.¹⁷

Marketing is a process for making concrete decisions about what the religious organization can do, and not do, to achieve its mission. Marketing is not selling, advertising, or promotion—though it may include all of these. *Marketing is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully*

¹⁵Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 41.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁷John W. Pearson and Robert D. Hisrich, *Marketing Your Ministry* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, 1990), p. 8.

*formulated programs to bring about voluntary “exchanges” with specifically targeted groups for the purpose of achieving the organization’s missional objectives....Most of all, marketing is a process for building responsiveness into a religious organization—responsiveness to those myriad groups whose needs must be satisfied if the organization is to be successful in its ministry endeavors.*¹⁸

The *marketing concept* is a management orientation that holds that the key to achieving organizational goals consists of the organization’s determining the needs and wants of target markets and adapting itself to delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than its competitors.¹⁹

From these definitions certain core principles can be identified: (1) assessment of the needs, wants and desires of the target market is absolutely essential; (2) success in marketing is evaluated by the ability to meet these needs better than competitors; and (3) meeting these needs demands adaptation by the marketer to the market, not vice versa.

Dimensions of the Marketing Definition

Confirmation of these core principles can readily be found within the marketing textbooks. One such book, *Marketing for Congregations*, can serve as an example. The writers list seven “distinctive characteristics of marketing for congregations” that build upon their basic definition.²⁰

1. Marketing is defined as a managerial process involving analysis, planning, implementation, and control.²¹
2. Marketing manifests itself in carefully formulated programs (not just random actions) to achieve desired responses.²²
3. Marketing seeks to bring about voluntary, mutually beneficial responses....When marketing, the congregation seeks to formulate a bundle of benefits for the target market (the persons whom the congregation wishes to serve) of sufficient attractiveness to produce a volun-

¹⁸Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 22.

¹⁹Philip Kotler, *Principles of Marketing*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 22.

²⁰These authors serve as good examples of the marketing approach since they, unlike some others, all bring to the task established academic and practical qualifications in the realm of ministry consultation (Norman Shawchuck has written and taught widely within the evangelical and mainline circles) and acknowledged marketing expertise (Philip Kotler is author of an award-winning textbook on marketing cited above; Bruce Wrenn and Gustave Rath both teach in the management and marketing fields).

²¹Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 46.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 46.

- tary relationship of value to both parties.²³
4. Marketing means the selection of target markets, rather than a quixotic attempt to be all things to all people.... We are suggesting that the most efficient use of scarce resources demands that each targeted group's needs, perceptions, preferences, and behaviors be researched and addressed so that the message communicated to that group will be fulfilling and favorably received.²⁴
 5. The purpose of marketing is to help organizations ensure their survival and continued health through serving their markets more effectively.... Effective marketing planning requires that an organization be very specific about its objectives and in choosing its target groups.²⁵
 6. Marketing relies on designing the organization's 'offering' in terms of the target market's needs and desires, rather than in terms of the seller's personal tastes.²⁶
 7. Marketing utilizes and blends a set of tools called the marketing mix—product design, pricing, communication, and distribution. Too often persons equate marketing with only one of the tools, such as advertising. But marketing is oriented toward producing results—and this requires a broad conception of all the factors influencing buying behavior.²⁷

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A MARKETING ORIENTATION

Analyzing the marketing philosophy is a complex process due to the variations of marketing applications that are present in the ministry realm. For most, adopting a marketing approach to ministry focuses essentially on developing sensitivity to a particular target market.²⁸ While this is certainly the most common, and popular, description of marketing, it is only a small portion of the larger marketing framework. In order to properly assess the movement, consideration will first be given to the larger marketing paradigm, identified as strategic marketing, and then specific attention will be given to the narrower concept of target marketing.

Strategic Marketing

The adoption of strategic marketing involves the ministry in the

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 46–47.

²⁵Ibid., p. 47.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 47–48.

²⁷Ibid., p. 48.

²⁸E.g., Robert E. Logan, *Beyond Church Growth* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1989), p. 71.

process of total design, or redesign, of itself in terms of its marketing approach. It may be best understood as an approach to strategic planning²⁹ that is decidedly governed by customer satisfaction as defined by the target market.³⁰ In this case, the end-user of the ministry becomes the chief concern in the design and implementation of the entire ministry strategy.

One textbook model for strategic marketing, used in the business realm, involves a four stage process: (1) Marketing Situation Analysis (analyzing markets; market segmentation; analyzing competition); (2) Designing Market Strategy (market targeting and positioning strategy; marketing strategies for selected situations; planning for new products); (3) Marketing Program Development (product portfolio strategy; distribution strategy; price strategy; promotion strategy); and (4) Implementing and Managing Marketing Strategy (designing effective organizations; marketing strategy implementation and control; strategic role of information).³¹ These stages form a circular process which interacts with the marketplace in order to keep the marketer on top of the changing environment. Within a secular business context the opening and closing concern is customer satisfaction, since customer satisfaction is the key to economic success.³² This fact poses a problem for those seeking to convert marketing theory and practice into a ministry tool (i.e., one must question the validity of any model which defines ministry in a way which begins and ends with the customer). Before considering the attempts to overcome this problem, it is necessary to examine two popular proposals for developing a strategic marketing approach to ministry.

The more technical model articulates a seven-step process: (1) develop a mission statement; (2) analyze your current situation considering both internal (strengths and weakness of the ministry) and external variables (opportunities and threats); (3) determine a target market; (4) design a marketing strategy with clear goals and utilizing the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion); (5) develop appropriate market-

²⁹John M. Bryson defines strategic planning as, “a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it” (*Strategic Planning for Public and Non-Profit Organizations* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988], p. 5). Pfeiffer, Goodstein, and Nolan define strategic planning as “the process by which the guiding members of an organization envision its future and develop the necessary procedures and operations to achieve that future” (*Shaping Strategic Planning* [Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989], p. 12).

³⁰David W. Cravens, *Strategic Marketing*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Irwin, 1991), p. 21.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 21.

ing tactics; (6) determine the marketing budget; and (7) engage in marketing control (implementation and monitoring of the plans).³³ The chief benefit of this model is its similarity to strategic planning methodology. Most churches would be greatly helped by engaging in some form of strategic planning in order to clarify their mission and develop a strategy for accomplishing that mission in a particular time and context. This benefit, however, should not blind us to the inherent tendency in the marketing mindset to define mission from the customer's perspective.

A less technical model for developing a strategic marketing plan for ministry is also built on a seven-step process: (1) collect information; (2) capture the vision; (3) identify and marshal your resources; (4) create the marketing plan; (5) implement the marketing plan; (6) gain feedback on the process; and (7) revise the plan and re-implement.³⁴ Again, there are benefits to the strategic considerations given to developing an intentional approach to ministry and systematically implementing it. Few, inside or outside of the marketing movement, doubt the validity of and benefits that come from careful planning and disciplined execution of those plans.³⁵

The problem with these approaches is whether the "religious" marketing proposals sufficiently avoid allowing customer satisfaction to replace their obligation to fulfill scriptural mandates about ministry. It is undeniable that secular marketing justifies its existence by assessing and satisfying customer expectations and demands. Marketing exists to give the customer what he wants, not what the company believes the customer needs. Are the ministry marketing models successful in avoiding the consumerist focus of secular marketing?

It is interesting to note that those who advocate marketing for ministry seem to have anticipated this problem. Their corrective seems to be found in placing a vision or mission (or both) statement chronologically before the development of the marketing plan.³⁶ The real question becomes, then, Are the concepts of mission and vision, as presented in these marketing books, actually terms which speak of scriptural mandates for ministry?

³³Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 220–232.

³⁴Barna, *Church Marketing*, pp. 30–32.

³⁵Scripture informs us of the value of careful plans well in advance of modern marketing and management theories (cf. Prov 21:5).

³⁶E.g., the authors of *Marketing for Congregations* place formulation of the mission statement prior to the development of the marketing plan (pp. 222–232). In his marketing books, Barna also argues that vision precedes the marketing plan (e.g., *Marketing the Church*, p. 91).

In discussing the issue of mission, the authors of *Marketing for Congregations* seem to clearly value the role of Scripture as a necessary pre-marketing consideration. They suggest that the first step in mission clarification is to answer the question, “What does Scripture and our own faith tradition teach us about our mission.”³⁷ While the reference to “faith tradition” greatly weakens the thrust of the question, this at least ties their approach to Scripture more than George Barna’s marketing approach.

Despite an attempt to ground his concept of vision in Scripture,³⁸ what Barna means by vision is not clearly rooted in biblical expressions of God’s purpose for the church. To the contrary, he defines vision as “a clear mental picture of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances.”³⁹ Conspicuously absent in this definition is any specific, direct connection to the Scriptures. When reference to the Bible does finally surface, it is only for the devotional purpose of knowing

³⁷p. 87.

³⁸Barna continues the oft-repeated abuse of Proverbs 29:18 as a proof-text for the concept of vision for ministry (*The Power of Vision* [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992], p. 159). The word “vision” (KJV) “refers to divine communication to prophets (as in 1 Sam 3:1) and not to individual goals that are formed” (Allen P. Ross, “Proverbs” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991], 5:1116). The historical and literary context of this proverb clearly shows that this is a means of describing the effects of God’s people turning their backs on His moral demands. The Hebrew word translated “perish” in the KJV means to “lack restraint” (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, ed. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968], s.v. “פָּרַע,” p. 829). It is used in Exodus 32:25 to describe the condition of the people at the incident of the golden calf (KJV translates it “were naked”; NASB translates it “out of control”). Additionally, the parallelism found in the verse supplies “the law” as the counterpart to “a vision.” The proverb speaks of the moral consequences of not possessing and heeding God’s Word, not of grasping a personal or corporate sense of ministry vision. While Barna does not seem to mind the dangerous consequence of applying this verse, namely the need for on-going revelation from God, fundamentalists should find it alarming.

³⁹*The Power of Vision*, p. 28. Barna should be taken quite literally when he uses the words, “imparted by God.” In an interview for *Leadership Journal* (“The Man Who Brought Marketing to Church” [Summer 1995], p. 126), he describes his own experience of vision development in the following manner:

I was reading my Bible and praying about our direction for the future, when the voice of God came to me, which I’ll paraphrase: “George, do you really think I’ve given you this company and these opportunities, only for you to turn your back on churches because they’re hard to work with? Do you really believe you’re the first Christian leader who has found the church hard to work with?”

God better.⁴⁰ Further compounding the confusion is the fact that Barna, in another place, suggests that vision comes before the development of the marketing plan, *but after* the collection of marketing information—“Armed with objective data about the marketplace, the marketer can then develop a *vision*....Vision encompasses decisions about what audiences to market to and what kind of product will be developed and offered.”⁴¹ In spite of efforts to avoid adopting wholesale the marketing obsession with the customer, the major models for ministry marketing fail to ground adequately their models in scriptural teaching about the mission of the church.

Target Marketing

A more narrow approach to marketing revolves around the concept of identifying a target market⁴² and developing means to generate successful exchanges with the targeted market segment. On a practical level, this is the type of marketing that is most commonly promoted and practiced in the ministry realm. The main writer, George Barna,⁴³ and the major churches which aggressively promote and implement marketing principles, Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Valley Community Church,⁴⁴ actually advocate this narrowed form of marketing. The popularity of this marketing model may be largely due to its combination of church growth theory and marketing savvy. The

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 88–89.

⁴¹Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 45. See also *Church Marketing*, pp. 30–31.

⁴²A target market is “that group of segments the company wishes to appeal to, design products for, and aim its marketing activities toward” (Courtland L. Bovee and William F. Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, 4th ed. [Boston: Irwin, 1992], p. 170).

⁴³While it is debatable whether Barna is the best technician of marketing, he has certainly been the most prolific; and though Barna has, in his later books, moved more toward the advocacy of a strategic approach to marketing, for the most part his writings focus on the tactical approach to marketing.

⁴⁴Both churches host large conferences for ministry leaders aimed at training them to design ministries which incorporate marketing principles. Willow Creek Community Church has also developed a specialized ministry, the Willow Creek Association, for networking churches that are designing themselves to use marketing to attract/reach “seekers.” While both of these churches are aggressively involved in the application of marketing principles to local church ministry, one should not assume that they are identical in philosophy and practices. From this writer’s perspective, Saddleback, a Southern Baptist Convention church, pastored by Rick Warren, is more conservative doctrinally and more aggressive in evangelizing and discipling those attracted to the church through marketing techniques. While neither of these two observations justify Saddleback’s excessive use of marketing techniques, one should not come to unwarranted conclusions about all churches which actively engage in marketing.

portion drawn from church growth theory is commonly identified as the homogenous unit principle. The basic premise is that people will come to Christ more easily if they are not forced to cross barriers such as language, race and class.⁴⁵ The marketing principle suggests “effective ministries have a select and well-defined market.”⁴⁶ Regardless of the validity of this wedlock, the church growth movement has seized upon marketing as the practical tool to implement the homogenous unit principle within a North American context.⁴⁷

The Meaning of Target Marketing

Underlying the definition of target marketing is the assumption that all interaction with the market is actually marketing. Given this assumption, targeted marketing gains its appeal by narrowing, or making more specific, the focus of the ministry’s appeals to potential customers. “The alternative to a specifically designed, well-positioned, *target-marketing* approach is to use a ‘scatter shot’ *mass marketing* approach where a single appeal is made to an undifferentiated mass market. The scatter shot approach pays no attention to differences in consumer needs, preferences, or behaviors.”⁴⁸ In common language, the choice is between ministry designed to be a church for everybody or ministry designed to be a church for a specific set of somebodies.⁴⁹

In marketing terminology there are three main strategies for developing a marketing package. *Undifferentiated marketing* is an approach in which the ministry decides “to go after the whole market with 1 offer

⁴⁵Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1980), p. 230.

⁴⁶Pearson and Hisrich, *Marketing Your Ministry*, p. 23.

⁴⁷McGavran developed his church growth principles as a missionary, and as a missionary tool. Understood in this context, the homogenous unit principle appears to be more of a common sense strategy than a marketing tool. It would seem that few would doubt the validity of church planting efforts that target a homogenous people and language group. A church planter in Mexico City will be more effective if he targets Hispanic people, preaches in Spanish and adopts an indigenous approach to ministry than if he continues to preach in English and lives like an American tourist. This type of “targeted” ministry approach seems quite different than a church planter in the north suburbs of Chicago designing his ministry to attract professional men between the ages of 25–50 (cf. Barbara Stewart, ed., *Church Leaders Handbook* [South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Community Church, 1991], p. 20).

⁴⁸Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 167.

⁴⁹Churches have for a long time opted for a form of targeted ministry and marketing. The slogan “A Family Church with You in Mind” is certainly a marketing device tailored to a specific group (families). Whether intentionally or not, a target market has been identified and ministry has been designed and promoted in order to reach that target.

and marketing mix, trying to attract as many new members as possible (this is another name for mass marketing).⁵⁰ *Differentiated marketing* occurs when the organization decides “to go after several market segments, developing an effective offer and marketing mix for each.”⁵¹ This may mean designing strong, but differing, marketing approaches for young families, young single adults, and empty nesters. *Concentrated marketing* occurs when the ministry seeks “to go after 1 market segment and develop the ideal offer and marketing mix.”⁵² These vary in effectiveness, according to marketing theory; undifferentiated marketing being considered the least effective, and concentrated marketing the most effective.

The ideal target marketing situation is to be able to identify clearly the type of individual that the church/ministry is seeking to reach. The embodiments of this approach, at least in the cases of Willow Creek and Saddleback respectively, are Unchurched Harry and Saddleback Sam.⁵³

The Process of Target Marketing

Standard marketing procedure for developing a targeted marketing package involves a three stage process: segment, target, and position.⁵⁴ The importance of these concepts, and the implications of their utilization necessitates careful examination.

Segmentation. The concept of segmentation presupposes the existence of a market. A market may be defined as “a distinct group of people and/or organizations which has resources it (or they) want to exchange, or might be willing to exchange, for distinct benefits.”⁵⁵ Or, more precisely, “For a market to exist, there must be people with particular needs and wants and one or more products that can satisfy these needs. Additionally, the people in the market must be willing and able

⁵⁰Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 196–197.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 197.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Willow Creek deliberately targets Unchurched Harry rather than Unchurched Mary because: (1) “men are more difficult to reach and are tougher in their demands upon the church”; (2) “if the service for seekers reaches men, it will reach women as well”; and (3) “men are traditionally the role model within the family” (Stewart, *Church Leaders Handbook*, p. 20).

⁵⁴Rick Warren (*The Purpose-Driven Seminar Notebook* [Mission Viejo, CA: Saddleback Seminars, n.d.], p. 27) uses a four-fold process: (1) Probe: learn all that you can about your area; (2) Partition: divide your market into segments; (3) Prioritize: choose which segment to go after first; and, (4) Position: develop a clear image of the type of church you want to be based on who you want to attract.

⁵⁵Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 137.

to purchase a product that satisfies their needs and wants.”⁵⁶ By definition, markets are large groups of diverse composition that can potentially be reached by the marketer profitably.⁵⁷

Due to the large diversity within a given market, marketing experts demand that each market must be clustered into segments with high degrees of similarity. The aim is to move from diversity to uniformity.⁵⁸

Market segmentation identifies groups of buyers within a product-market whose needs are similar. Segmentation helps an organization to match its capabilities to the requirements of one or more groups of buyers. The central idea in segmentation is to examine differences in needs and to identify two or more segments with the product-market of interest, each containing buyers with similar needs/wants for the product category of interest to management.⁵⁹

In a secular context, car buyers would be considered a market, while young, upper-middle class males interested in a sporty image would constitute a market segment.

At the heart of clustering is the concept of responsiveness to marketing efforts. Segmentation is the “process of dividing large heterogeneous markets into smaller, homogeneous subsets of people or businesses with similar needs and/or responsiveness to marketing mix offerings.”⁶⁰ This is an oft-repeated demand,

For any segmentation scheme to be useful, the consumers in the segments must in general respond differently to variations in promotional activity... Without this variation between segments, the market segmentation has no point at all.⁶¹

The objective is to identify groups within the broader market that are sufficiently similar in characteristics and responses to warrant separate market-

⁵⁶Cravens, *Strategic Marketing*, pp. 68–69.

⁵⁷James F. Engel, Martin R. Warshaw, and Thomas C. Kinnear, *Promotional Strategy: Managing the Marketing Communications Process*, 7th ed. (Boston: Irwin, 1991), pp. 208–209.

⁵⁸One can readily see the natural attraction of the church growth movement, with its homogenous unit principle, to the marketing field, with its emphasis on market segmentation. The latter provides the practical application of the former’s theory.

⁵⁹Cravens, *Strategic Marketing*, p. 70.

⁶⁰Thomas C. Kinnear and Kenneth L. Bernhardt, *Principles of Marketing* (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman/Little Brown, 1990), p. 103.

⁶¹James F. Engel, Martin R. Warshaw, and Thomas C. Kinnear, *Promotional Strategy*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: Irwin, 1991), p. 208.

ing treatment.⁶²

Market segmentation is the process of placing the potential customers in a product-market into subgroups, each of which will respond similarly to a particular marketing positioning strategy.⁶³

Market segmentation is the process of classifying the population into groups with different needs, characteristics, or behaviors that will affect their reaction to a religious program or ministry offered to them.⁶⁴

Segmentation begins with the selection of the basis or criteria for segmentation. The business environment operates with a larger set of variables by which a market may be segmented than most advocates of ministry marketing. The dominant type of variable in ministry marketing is the characteristics of people. Usual sub-categories for this variable include: geographic, demographic, behavioral, and psychographic.⁶⁵ Some ministry leaders have added a fifth category—spiritual.⁶⁶

Segmenting by geography identifies potential target markets by their relative location to the ministry and any particular characteristics of that region or locale.⁶⁷ Demographics refers to the “study of the numerical characteristics of the population. People can be grouped by sex, age, ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, income, and other quantifiable factors.”⁶⁸ Warren suggests that churches ought to consider the demographic factors of age (how many in each age group?), marital status (how many singles/married?), income (what do they earn?), education (what is the education level?), and occupation (where do they work? white/blue collar?).⁶⁹ Demographic variables are the most popular variables for distinguishing target groups for two reasons. First, “an individual’s or a group’s wants and preferences are often highly associated” with these variables,⁷⁰ and this is the bottom line of marketing. Second, “demographic variables are easier to measure than other types of vari-

⁶²Ibid., p. 209.

⁶³Cravens, *Strategic Marketing*, p. 163.

⁶⁴Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 167.

⁶⁵Shawchuck, et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 175–176; Bovee and Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, p. 157.

⁶⁶E.g., Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Notebook*, p. 18.

⁶⁷Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 174–175.

⁶⁸Bovee and Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, pp. 157–158.

⁶⁹*Purpose-Driven Notebook*, p. 18.

⁷⁰Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 176.

ables.”⁷¹

“In behavior segmentation, people are divided into groups on the basis of their knowledge, attitude, use or response to a religious organization.”⁷² Particularly, behavior segments are usually further divided on the basis of variables such as purchase occasion (when and why do they purchase), benefits being sought, user status (non-users, new users, regular users, potential users), usage rate (heavy, medium, light).⁷³ Ministry applications of these variables could be: purchase occasion—evaluation of when a particular group (e.g., baby boomers) make decisions to choose a church; benefits sought—what they look for in a church; user status—churched or non-churched; usage rate—determination of how often will they attend. A common practice used by marketing churches at their inception was to survey the community regarding its dissatisfactions with church.⁷⁴ The surveys served the purpose of identifying some of the behavioral variables or patterns (e.g., user status, benefits sought) that would go into the selection of their target market.

The psychographic approach to segmentation “refers to the grouping of people into homogeneous segments on the basis of psychological makeup—namely, values, attitudes, personality, and lifestyle.”⁷⁵ Social class is a label used sometimes to speak of some of these same variables.⁷⁶ The underlying principle is that each person desires to be perceived as a certain type of person, therefore marketing strategy should identify these common images and direct efforts toward them.

In segmenting the market by spiritual criteria, Rick Warren suggests that churches should do so on the basis of what the people in the market already know about the gospel.⁷⁷ Obvious attention would need to be

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 179–180. Or, from a secular perspective, “Many marketers believe the best starting point for determining market segments is to cluster consumers into groups based on their attitude toward, use of, or response to actual products or product attributes” (Bovee and Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, p. 159).

⁷³Bovee and Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, pp. 159–162.

⁷⁴Willow Creek Community Church began with a simple survey as to why people in that community *do not* attend church (Stewart, *Church Leaders Handbook*, p. 20). Saddleback Community Church began with a “personal opinion poll” which asked five questions: (1) Are you currently active in a local church? (2) What do you feel is the greatest need in the Saddleback Valley? (3) Why do you think most people don’t attend church? (4) If you were looking for a church, what kind of things would you look for? and (5) What advice would you give me? How can I help you?

⁷⁵Bovee and Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, p. 163.

⁷⁶Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 178–179.

⁷⁷*Purpose-Driven Notebook*, p. 19.

paid to the dominant denominational influences in the ministry area. Jim Dethmer provides an example of how the market could be segmented on the basis of user status (churched versus unchurched) in combination with a spiritual variable (believer versus unbeliever).⁷⁸ This set of segmenting variables yields four potential target markets: churched believers; churched non-believers; unchurched believers; and, unchurched non-believers.

Based on the variables selected, research is conducted to identify segment clusters. The needed information can be obtained through a wide variety of cost efficient avenues (e.g., census information, Chamber of Commerce, community surveys) or can be purchased from companies which specialize in this area (e.g., Church Information and Development Services⁷⁹). Once the information has been collected, it must be analyzed according to segments in order to identify a profile of descriptive characteristics, a statement of the expectations of the potential target markets, position of the ministry in relation to competitors, and the attractiveness of the various segments.⁸⁰

Target. Once the market segments are clearly identified, the targeting process requires the marketer to select “one or more of these segments to focus on” with the intent of “developing ministries and marketing plans to meet the unique needs and interests of each chosen segment.”⁸¹ There are several considerations which should factor into selecting a target segment.

A ministry should, first of all, know the segment options well. “Because niche strategies depend upon access to a substantial amount of reliable and detailed information, do not select a segment about which little is, or will be, known.”⁸² Based on this knowledge, the church must be sure the segment is reachable. “Niche marketing requires communication efforts and providing services geared to the special needs and in-

⁷⁸Jim Dethmer, “Who is Your Church Called to Reach,” audio tape, vol. 27, *The Pastor’s Update* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, 1991).

⁷⁹CIDS (Costa Mesa, CA) offers extensive Ministry Area Profiles which provide various demographic summaries of the community within a pre-determined radius, e.g., 1, 3, and 5 miles from the intersection nearest the church or ministry. The three standard profiles are Trends (an indication of the changes taking place within the surrounding population), U.S. Lifestyles (examines the lifestyle characteristics within the ministry area), and Census (identifies demographic information such as family structure, school enrollment, marital status, race, educational level, occupation, etc.).

⁸⁰Cravens, *Strategic Marketing*, p. 191.

⁸¹Shawchuck, et al. *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 167.

⁸²Barna, *Church Marketing*, p. 159.

terests of a relatively narrowly defined group of people....Be sure you know how to get to your designated segment.”⁸³

Determining reachability requires that a church ask whether its capabilities suit the target group’s needs. Barna warns,

Do not make the mistake so many churches make: go for the largest segment...Carefully analyze your corporate culture and the types of segments to which you could potentially minister effectively. If a target group that would otherwise be appealing is not one with which your church is likely to relate, do not target that segment.⁸⁴

The strengths of the church are then considered as a major indicator of the target to be selected. “Each segment should be rated on its intrinsic market attractiveness in relation to the congregation’s particular strengths. The congregation should focus on market segments where it is capable of satisfying that segment’s needs.”⁸⁵

Additionally, the marketers usually argue that there should be some degree of mutual attraction between the church and the target. Rick Warren suggests the church evaluate its potential to reach groups by assessing the kind of people who already attend the church and the kind of leaders in church.⁸⁶ Leith Anderson seems to echo this sentiment, “Most churches must either target people like themselves or go where other people are. The more people are alike, the easier they are to reach; the more people are different, the harder they are to reach.”⁸⁷ Bill Hybels offers an even more brash statement of the principle, “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.”⁸⁸

Having made a decision regarding the possibility of reaching a particular target, the marketers suggest that the church must evaluate the size of the targeted segment. “The market you select as your target should be large enough to enable you to survive. If you select a segment that is too tiny you will spend an enormous amount of resources attempting to reach and minister to a group that cannot provide the necessary economies of scale to justify being targeted.”⁸⁹ It is possible to press

⁸³Ibid., p. 160.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 199.

⁸⁶Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 174–175.

⁸⁷*Dying for Change*, p. 166.

⁸⁸Quoted in Webster, *Selling Jesus*, p. 58.

⁸⁹Barna, *Church Marketing*, p. 160.

segmentation so that the segments are narrowed beyond practical feasibility.⁹⁰ A portion of this evaluation relates to the church's potential for success. "Some segments simply do not hold enough promise of success to justify putting all of your eggs into that basket. Toward that end you ought to have a sense of what has been done by other organizations seeking to capture the loyalty of a given segment before you identify them as your target group."⁹¹

Position. Following the selection of the target market, the ministry must devise and implement plans to position itself favorably in relation to that target market.

The *position* of an organization is "the relationship of the institution and its products to competing institutions and their products—as perceived by constituents (a person or group)." *Positioning* describes the efforts of an organization to locate or relocate itself in the *minds* of the persons it is trying to attract or serve. Positioning is attempting to find a niche, a "hole" in the mind of the consumer in which the organization might be lodged.⁹²

An essential element of the positioning concept is that of competitive relationships. It is doubtful that market positioning can be understood apart from this. The idea of competitors should not be limited to other ministries, but properly entails anything that is competing for the same target market.⁹³

Two major components of developing a competitive position are image and perception. From the ministry's viewpoint, the matter of image is the crucial element of a positioning strategy. Put in the form of a question, to position itself effectively, the church must ask, What image does the church want to project to its targeted marketed? Corresponding to this, and, from the target market's viewpoint, is the matter of perception. Barna says of this matter, "Consider the data that are on the perceptual maps of the people you wish to reach. If you are going to avoid making bad decisions regarding your positioning, you must know where you and other organizations stand regarding image."⁹⁴ The church ought to consider "what characteristics of a church or congregation really matter to your target audience. Nothing is gained by positioning your church in a manner that is irrelevant to your market."⁹⁵ Barna

⁹⁰Cravens, *Strategic Marketing*, p. 257.

⁹¹Barna, *Church Marketing*, pp. 160–161.

⁹²Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 199, 201.

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁴Barna, *Church Marketing*, p. 154.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 152.

claims that

a good marketer will (1) understand what is important to the target audience; (2) create an ideal profile for the church's image, an image that may not currently exist but which is readily achievable; (3) accurately determine how the church is currently perceived. That marketer will conceive a strategy for positioning and marketing the church accordingly.⁹⁶

In order to offset the consumerist sound of this approach, Anderson cautions that a church must determine its non-negotiables, those practical and theological matters it will never sacrifice in order to reach a target market.⁹⁷ Given the shape that the market-driven ministries are assuming, one must wonder if the warning is heeded often and well enough.

The positioning objective is accomplished by the successful combination of various elements of the ministry's "offering" to the target market.

A marketing program positioning strategy is the combination of the product, channel of distribution, price, and promotion strategies selected by the management to position a firm against its key competitors in meeting the needs and wants of the market target. This strategy may also be called the "marketing mix" or the "marketing program."⁹⁸

The authors of *Marketing for Congregations* define the four components which make up the marketing mix as follows: *Product*—"The program(s) and ministries that the religious organization offers a target segment"; *Price*—"The sacrifices or commitments that the target group must make to use or adopt the organization's programs"; *Place*—"The means or location by which the program is delivered to the target segment"; and *Promotion*—"The means used to communicate the attributes of the organization's program(s) to the targeted segments."⁹⁹

In sum, positioning requires that the church view itself, and the gospel, as something which must be tailored to the felt needs of a very specific slice of the general population.

The Demand for Target Marketing

Given the claim by Barna that "*the major problem plaguing the Church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become*

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 157.

⁹⁷Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990), p. 167.

⁹⁸Cravens, *Strategic Marketing*, p. 73.

⁹⁹Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 231.

a marketing-driven environment,¹⁰⁰ one should expect ample argumentation for its adoption. The arguments may be considered in two categories, pragmatic and biblical.

Pragmatic arguments for target marketing. On a pragmatic level, the proponents of target marketing argue that: (1) a precise target enables a more concentrated pursuit of excellence and (2) a narrow target yields more productive results due to increased awareness of and sensitivity to customer needs and wants.

Target marketing maximizes the energies and resources of the organization by applying them to specific target markets, rather than toward a less precisely specified target. The underlying motive is to avoid falling prey to the “*majority fallacy*—the common misconception that to be successful a product or service must appeal to everybody or at least to the majority of people.”¹⁰¹ The “ministry” advocates of this practice also tie their thinking to the question of whether ministry aimed at everybody will actually be accomplished. “No single organization can serve all the needs and interests of all the people surrounding it. A congregation that attempts to do so will likely dissipate its resources and accomplish little.”¹⁰²

According to Logan, “One of the greatest mistakes in planting a church is beginning with the assumption that it will be a church for everybody. No church can serve everybody. Every successful church has a unique angle, something special to offer to a particular population segment.”¹⁰³ Logan extends his thinking beyond church planting to include all church ministry. The contention is that a church must clarify the type of ministry it will develop and carefully specify for whom it will seek to develop it. “Your philosophy-of-ministry statement is your guiding light in determining what kind of church you are going to be, based on what kind of people you desire to attract.”¹⁰⁴ Barna agrees with this assessment,

In speaking to pastors of declining churches, a common thread was their desire to do something for everybody. They had fallen into the strategic black hole of creating a ministry that looked great on paper, but had no ability to perform up to standards. Despite their worthy intentions, they tried to be so helpful to everyone that they wound up being helpful to no

¹⁰⁰Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 23.

¹⁰¹Bovee and Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, p. 155.

¹⁰²Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, p. 137.

¹⁰³Logan, *Beyond Church Growth*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

one.¹⁰⁵

C. Peter Wagner, echoing the same concern, suggests, “each church, like each individual person, has a unique personality. No two churches are exactly alike.”¹⁰⁶ He continues,

No church can do everything. No church can meet everyone’s needs. No church can minister to all people. Therefore, choices concerning excellence in ministry must be made. It is a poor approach to say, “We’ll fit in a little bit of everything for everybody.”...It is better to set ministry priorities and do a few things well rather than attempt many things in a mediocre way.¹⁰⁷

In addition to enabling a more narrow pursuit of excellence, marketing theorists also argue that success in the marketplace requires a precisely defined target. The key to success is satisfied customers, and customers are satisfied by meeting their expectations. It is, according to marketing principles, axiomatic that attempting to satisfy diverse expectations leads inevitably to failure, whether in business or ministry.

Marketing theorists argue that adopting a target marketing approach enables a ministry to be more customer responsive in at least four ways: (1) religious organizations which have cultivated a market orientation are in a better position to spot emerging opportunities; (2) market-oriented leaders can make finer adjustments in the way they package their ministries to match the unique interests of the market; (3) religious marketers can make finer adjustments to their offer to match the desire of the target market; and (4) organizations that approach ministry through a market orientation are ready to make adjustments to the elements of their marketing plans, for example, using different ministries to target young families versus older families.¹⁰⁸

Based on these statements, the main arguments for adopting a target market approach to ministry are pragmatic—success in ministry is achieved by doing a few things well to which a particular segment of the larger market will be responsive, thereby generating church growth.¹⁰⁹ But these arguments are vulnerable on the surface, in its definition of excellence, and in the ultimate means adopted for achieving success, that

¹⁰⁵George Barna, *User Friendly Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), pp. 50–51.

¹⁰⁶C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), p. 175.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁰⁸Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations*, pp. 167–168.

¹⁰⁹Barna, *Marketing the Church*, p. 26.

is, consumerism.

The definition of ministry excellence set forth above is shallow. The discussions of excellence focus on technical quality and ignore the moral aspects of true excellence. Lee Strobel, in summarizing a ministry experience of friend, provides an example of this:

It was a powerful lesson on the importance of excellence in any event or service geared to the unchurched. While Trevor's ministry lacked the financial resources of many established churches, its members made sure that whatever they presented was done with quality and concern for detail.¹¹⁰

The remainder of the chapter, entitled "Gimme Something Good," carries this theme forward. It is certainly true that churches have too often been content with mediocrity, but the corrective to this requires more than Strobel and the marketers are advocating. True excellence cannot be defined by mere technical quality alone; it is never less, but it is always more than this. As Gary Inrig notes, "To speak of excellence is to speak about values; to address the question of what is 'good.'"¹¹¹ The pursuit of excellence ought to flow from the believer's commitment to God's glory, not from a desire to be impressive to the unsaved. The marketing movement's preoccupation with customer perception seems to drive it to pursue excellence for no more noble reasons than Ford Motor Company, or any other business—success in the marketplace.

Biblical excellence involves moral discernment (Phil 1:9–10) and obedience to God's commands (2 Tim 2:5). It is quite possible that the market-driven church could put on the best, from the perspective of technical quality, weekend seeker service imaginable, yet fall short of biblical excellence because it compromised the truth of God's Word in the purpose, style, and substance of the service. True excellence must involve doing what God wants done in the manner that God wants it done.

The deeper problem is found in that the method chosen for achieving success, namely, responding to and satisfying the needs of the target market, moves the ministry of the church into the realm of consumerism. This shift may be short-term effective, but it will lead to long-term failure for at least three reasons. First, consumerism embodies a spirit which makes the consumer sovereign. As noted above, and will

¹¹⁰*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 189.

¹¹¹*Called to Excellence* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), p. 23. Inrig makes some very profitable suggestions about the problems with defining excellence in utilitarian and technical terms (cf. pp. 31–33). Though he is not writing about marketing, his comments seem, from my perspective, quite applicable to the definition of excellence most often found in marketing discussions.

be evidenced further in the discussion below, the church becomes consumed with the needs of the consumer. But this posture is diametrically opposed to the biblical stance of God's messengers. Wells's assessment is right on target,

A business is in the market simply to sell its products; it doesn't ask consumers to surrender themselves to the product. The church on the other hand, does call for such a surrender. It is not merely marketing a product; it is declaring Christ's sovereignty over all of life and declaring the necessity of obedient submission to him and to the truth of his Word.¹¹²

This stance also endorses rather than confronts a self-centered approach to life.¹¹³ Our culture's over-estimation of duty to self is thereby swallowed up into the church. Again, Wells is helpful in seeing the downside of this strategy,

Allowing the consumer to be sovereign in this way in fact sanctions a bad habit. It encourages us to indulge in constant internal inventory in the church no less than in the marketplace, to ask ourselves perpetually whether the 'products' we are being offered meet our present 'felt needs.' In this sort of environment, market research has found that there is scarcely any consumer loyalty to particular products and brands anymore. The consumer, like the marketeer, is now making fresh calculations all the time. And so it is that the churches that have adopted the strategy of marketing themselves have effectively installed revolving doors.¹¹⁴

In the second place, since the consumer's needs and the competition are ever-expanding, the church finds itself in a pursuit which requires it to adopt the same materialistic mindset that secular businesses embrace in order to win market share. Modern consumers are trained by our culture to search continually for the "best deal"; therefore, the marketing churches are being forced, by their own philosophy, to operate as a business. Webster argues that "Church marketers look at the baby boomer the way shopping-mall retailers look at customers. Success depends on giving people what they want. Meeting emotional and spiritual felt needs becomes a commodity to be experienced, given the right personalities, performance and programs."¹¹⁵ The gospel, when conceived

¹¹²David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 76. I recognize that some readers may find this description too strong, but it seems, from my perspective, compatible with the New Testament teaching of repentance (Acts 3:19; 26:20), turning from darkness to light (Acts 26:18), and the need for continued exercise of faith in Christ (1 Cor 15:1-2; Col 1:22-23).

¹¹³Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, p. 65.

¹¹⁴*God in the Wasteland*, p. 75.

¹¹⁵*Selling Jesus*, p. 70.

in this way, is brutally distorted.

Finally, consumerism compromises the universal mission of the church in two ways. By focusing on a precisely narrowed target market, it takes on an exclusionary spirit. Webster is right to observe,

Theoretically, there are many groups to choose from, including the poor, the aged, students, Afro-Americans and Hispanics, but practically, church marketers exclusively target white, middle-class, college-educated baby boomers....This is a church growth strategy intended for children-centered, career-focused, consumer-oriented families that live in the suburbs.¹¹⁶

Additionally, the very approach, by watering down the message to fit felt needs, may attract people, but not be able to bring to them what they really need. It seems “many churches who want desperately to attract people to Christ miss the point by offering worship so shallow that not enough of Christ is proclaimed to engender lasting belief.”¹¹⁷ They may end up gathering a great crowd, but ultimately fail because they have used methods that create consumers, not converts. “Tailoring the gospel to fit the consumer distorts the gospel, discounts the work of the Holy Spirit and dehumanizes men and women made in the image of God.”¹¹⁸

Biblical arguments for target marketing. The marketing movement has done little to supply a biblical self-defense. This is not to suggest that attempts have not been made to defend and promote ministry marketing on biblical grounds, only that the biblical texts are provided as justification of a position already accepted. Their logic seems to flow in this manner: marketing works, therefore it must be true; since it is true, it must be in the Bible. While allusions and examples of marketing are said to be found throughout Scripture,¹¹⁹ the two texts most often cited are 1 Corinthians 9:15–23 and Acts 17:22–31.

The marketing books do not give exegetical treatment to these pas-

¹¹⁶Ibid., pp. 58–59.

¹¹⁷Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 280.

¹¹⁸Webster, *Selling Jesus*, p. 73.

¹¹⁹Barna finds marketing examples in such *unique* places as the fame of Uzziah’s reign (2 Chron 26:15), Ezra’s survey of resources and available skills (Ezra 1, 2), and the role Barnabas played in convincing the early church that Saul was no longer a persecutor of the church (*Church Marketing*, p. 23). Following this hermeneutic, one must wonder if there are any situations in the Bible that are not examples of marketing. Leith Anderson follows this pattern by claiming that “the concepts of learning and reaching the market are deeply rooted in the New Testament” (*Dying for Change*, p. 164). Judging from the actual absence of texts used to back these claims, the roots of these concepts are apparently buried so deeply no one can dig them up!

sages, therefore the supposed evidence of marketing strategy is not tightly connected to the language or argument of the text. The main arguments that Barna draws from the Corinthian passage are that Paul: (1) deliberately sought to remove barriers from his ministry; (2) made himself and his ministry “relevant to the needs and interests of those he preached the Gospel to”; and (3) had a specific target group for ministry, therefore the contemporary church ought to as well.¹²⁰

Only a surface examination of this passage could yield these conclusions. It is not correct to suggest that Paul was removing barriers to his ministry; he was actually seeking to avoid causing harm to his ministry by doing anything that offended the conscience of unbelievers (cf. 1 Cor 10:32–33). This is an important difference. Barna moves from his observation about Paul to this conclusion: “What barriers can you identify that keep you from implementing the vision for ministry God has given you and your church?”¹²¹ However, contrary to Barna, it is clear from the context of the passage that Paul was discussing the issue of yielding his personal rights in order not to be offensive to anyone, not ways in which he could remove barriers to ministry.

Furthermore, this passage says nothing of Paul making himself or his ministry “relevant to the needs and interests” of those to whom he preached the Gospel. Paul’s message is not even mentioned in the section of the passage which speaks of Paul’s cultural adjustments. Again, Paul was not seeking relevance, he was seeking to avoid offense. As MacArthur accurately states,

He was not advocating a marketing plan. He was not making a plea for “contextualization.” He was not suggesting that the message be made more acceptable, or that the role of preaching be replaced by psychology, skits, and worldly entertainment. He was calling for self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of proclaiming the unadulterated truth to those who do not know Christ.¹²²

Nor is it legitimate to argue, as Barna does, on the basis of Paul’s Gentile mission that contemporary local churches should identify specific groups to target for ministry. This is an invalid comparison for at least two reasons. First, Paul has a specific mandate via special, direct revelation from God, not by market research (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17); therefore, any comparison is faulty if it does not account for this very significant difference between his apostolic commission and current-day ministry plans. Second, the Gentiles, when considered as a group, cannot be compared

¹²⁰*Church Marketing*, pp. 223–225.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹²²John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), p. 95.

with a specific target group since the former actually forms an entire market, not a specific homogenous segment. It defies logic to move from an enormous and diverse group like “Gentiles” to a specific target group like “white, baby boomer professionals.” In contemporary idiom, this is comparing apples and oranges.

Acts 17:22–31 is also used as justification for target marketing. Leith Anderson assesses Paul’s ministry philosophy in this manner,

Paul practiced his teaching. When he went to Corinth where there was a synagogue, he started with Jews and related to their Hebrew traditions and laws. However, when he went to Athens (Acts 17) he recognized a different market, and he addressed those on Mars Hill as a Greek, quoting from a pagan philosopher. Paul knew that different people had to be reached different ways.¹²³

Barna also sees Paul’s reference to the Athenians’ pagan superstitions and his quotation of a secular poet as evidence of his attempts to “make the Gospel relevant to the Athenians” and to prove that he was “conversant with their culture and their way of thinking.”¹²⁴

The problem with these assessments of Paul’s ministry at the Areopagus is twofold. First, Anderson mishandles the text in concluding that Paul addressed “those on Mars Hill as a Greek, quoting from a pagan philosopher.” Paul takes his stand, as he always did, upon the Old Testament Scriptures. His sermon contains references or allusions to fourteen Old Testament passages and is soaked in the theological thought of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., creation, God’s transcendence). He is not constructing a natural theology or appealing to the Athenians on the basis of Greek philosophy.¹²⁵ As F. F. Bruce notes, “Paul’s presuppositions are not drawn from Platonism or Stoicism but unambiguously from the OT.”¹²⁶

Second, contrary to the impression given by Barna and Anderson,

¹²³*Dying for Change*, p. 165.

¹²⁴*Church Marketing*, p. 229.

¹²⁵In 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5, Paul makes it clear that he refuses to adapt the gospel to Greek wisdom. Some argue that Paul adopted this stance because of the failure of his philosophical attempt at Athens. If this were true, it would certainly argue against the marketing application of Acts 17. Yet, such an interpretation of the relation between 1 Corinthians and Acts 17 (1) fails to handle the details of the text, which clearly indicate that Paul was not marshaling philosophical, but Scriptural arguments; (2) incorrectly assumes that Paul’s ministry at the Areopagus was a failure, but the text reveals that it met with the same results as his other ministry attempts: some believed, some denied, and some requested to hear more later (vv. 32–34); and (3) ignores the fact that Paul, prior to the Corinthian letter, had already established and published his practice of preaching Christ crucified (cf. Gal 3:1).

¹²⁶*The Acts of the Apostles*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 382.

the Apostle does not seek to demonstrate his interest in their culture. It is true that Paul begins his sermon with an acknowledgment of their worship practices—the altar to the unknown god. However, the purpose of Paul’s reference to this altar is not to seek relevance, but to confront their error. Verse 23 should not be understood as suggesting that the Athenians were actually worshipping the true God without knowing it. The Greek pronouns of this verse are neuter, not masculine. Therefore, Paul actually says, “*What* therefore you worship in ignorance, *this* I proclaim to you” (NASB, emphasis added). The change is subtle, but the point is crucial. Paul is not saying that they are worshipping the true God without knowing it. He is only suggesting that they recognize that there is a God somewhere of Whom they may not be aware. The emphasis of the phrase is not upon their worship, but upon their ignorance. Ned Stonehouse captures the essence of Paul’s argument,

He says in effect, “That which ye worship *acknowledging openly your ignorance*, I proclaim unto you.” The ignorance rather than the worship is thus underscored, and Paul is indicating that he will inform them with regard to that concerning which they acknowledge ignorance.¹²⁷

Rather than seeking to cultivate relevancy, Paul boldly asserts that he will instruct them in their area of ignorance. He claims, with great confidence, the authority to tell them the answer which they themselves have admitted inability to answer.

These “pillar” texts, 1 Corinthians 9:18–23 and Acts 17:22–31, do not support the conclusions and practices of the marketing advocates. In fact, these texts actually argue against the type of cultural accommodation they are promoting in the name of effective evangelism and church growth.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to provide an overview of marketing principles and practices in order to understand the ministry philosophy embodied in this very popular movement. While there have been critical comments made throughout this article, its main intent is to lay the groundwork for a full examination of the marketing movement’s fundamental flaw, adopting a mode of ministry that makes man, rather than God, the center of the church’s mission. The words of David Wells serve as a good transition to the critical evaluation which will follow in the next issue of the *Journal*:

What is now occurring within this process of adaptation to cultural need is

¹²⁷Ned B. Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Areopagus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 19.

a set of substitutions that might well have a lethal effect on the practice of historic Christian faith. Technique is being substituted for truth, marketing action for thought, the satisfaction of the individual for the health of the church, the therapeutic vision of the world for a doctrinal vision, the unmanageable by the manageable, organism by organization, those who can preach the Word of God by those who can manage an organization, the spiritual by the material. At the center of these substitutions is an individualism fired by shallow, self-centered consumerism. And along with this, and because of it, has come a debilitating loss of truth—the very thing that brought the mainline denominations low—behind that there lies the loss of awareness of God as objective and transcendent. This, too, is an inescapable part of the move into the market, of adaptation to the ways of the world that modernization has brought about.¹²⁸

¹²⁸*God in the Wasteland*, pp. 86–87.