

Consumer Religion

By David Feddes

The customer is king. The key to almost any successful business is to figure out what people want and then give it to them. You've got to please the customer. It's that simple.

What's true in business seems to be true in the religion business as well. The customer is king. Religious publishers won't print a book if there's no market for it; religious recording companies won't produce an album if they don't think people are going to buy it; a religious broadcaster can't raise funds on the air if he's not saying things his audience wants to hear; and a church isn't going to expand and thrive unless it's the kind of place people want to be.

These days, even the Bible is tailored to please the customer. People whose main interest is sports might not want a plain old Bible, containing nothing but the revealed truth of God, but they might be interested in a New Testament that includes profiles of Christian sports heroes talking about their favorite Bible passages. The market for Bibles is worth hundreds of millions of dollars a year, and sales are best when there are different Bibles to suit different customers. As the president of the Christian Booksellers Association once put it, "In a Baskin-Robbins society, people don't want chocolate or vanilla. They want a special flavor that really suits their needs."

Now, I have to admit that I hadn't thought of the Word of God as a brand of ice cream. But there are those who do, and they're selling Bibles in every flavor imaginable. And everybody's happy. You get the Bible in your favorite flavor, and the booksellers get their hundreds of millions. Everybody wins!

Companies try to please people shopping for Bibles, and pastors try to please people shopping for a church. These days, before a minister tries to start up a new congregation, he'll first conduct a survey of the neighborhood to find out what people like and don't like. Many pastors and church leaders are fascinated with how to grow and market the church. One survey of preachers asked what author most affected their ministry. The person named more often than any other was a popular church growth consultant—not a theologian or Bible scholar, not a leader in prayer or spiritual revival, but an expert in church management and marketing.

Pleasing the customer is high on the religious agenda. Preachers and church boards and sellers of religious materials are studying consumers very carefully. They are studying you, trying to learn what makes you tick, trying to figure out what needs you feel, trying to offer something you'll find appealing, trying to draw you into their church.

At one level, this isn't all bad. Producing various formats and translations of the Bible may get more people to read and understand its message. If so, that's great—as long as the meaning of God's Word isn't twisted to suit people's taste. Some publishers and broadcasters produce materials that are faithful to God and helpful to people, and if good marketing gets the gospel message out to more people, wonderful! Many preachers want more people to know Jesus Christ and join the fellowship of the church; they're not just out to build a personal empire. If, by understanding the people they want to reach and presenting the gospel as attractively as possible, they lead more people to Christ, splendid!

The apostle Paul himself, perhaps the greatest missionary of all time, said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Paul tried to adapt himself and his methods to meet people where they were. That's one reason he was such an effective missionary.

But although Paul was willing to change his methods, he would not change his message to suit religious consumers. He refused to change Christian truth into consumer religion. It's good to be aware of people's needs and preferences, but when the main goal is to produce satisfied customers, something has gone terribly wrong. There are serious dangers in a consumer approach to religion. Paul wrote Timothy, a young pastor, and said:

Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Timothy 4:3).

Pleasing the Customer

There's always a market for consumer religion. There's a market for preachers who say what people want to hear and for churches who give people what they want. But consumer religion is a flimsy foundation for your life or the life of the church. Canadian sociologist Reg Bibby describes how Canada is filled with consumer religion.

[Religious organizations] offer religion as a range of consumer goods. Rather than saying to culture, "This is what religion is," they have been much more inclined to say to culture, "What do you want religion to be?" ...Religion is available to Canadians in all shapes and sizes, and fragment-minded consumers have before them a multitude of choices.

That's not just true of Canada. It's true of the United States, and it's true of consumer religion in every place and time.

Consumer religion is nothing new, after all. There have always been people who want gods that suit their fancies, and there have always been leaders willing to give them what they want. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God, the people back at the bottom of the mountain got tired of waiting for Moses to come back. They gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us" (Exodus 32:1). So Aaron gave the people what they wanted. He made a golden calf that everybody could see and admire. They had a wild party to celebrate, and it was all a lot of fun. But then Moses returned from the mountain, and God punished them for their idolatry.

It's easy to manufacture a god that pleases the customer. People like to hear that God is a golden calf, or that God is their inner child, or that God is Mother Earth, or whatever else suits their fancy. But what they end up with is a worthless idol. It's an affront to God, and it's deadly for all who worship the idol.

When a religious organization gets too concerned with pleasing the customer, it misrepresents who God is and it also misrepresents who we are. The prophet Isaiah told people about a holy and awesome God, and he showed them how sinful they were in the light of God's purity. That wasn't what most people wanted to hear. They wanted

a positive religion, one with a helpful, harmless god that made them feel good about themselves and optimistic about their future. As Isaiah put it,

They say... to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!" (Isaiah 30:10-11)

Once you stop thinking about God's holiness, once you abandon the moral standards of the Bible for standards you like better, once you're surrounded by preachers whose main goal is to boost your self-esteem, you can *feel* good about yourself without *being* good.

Maybe you heard about the study awhile back which compared students from various industrialized nations. In math and science, American students came in last; students from South Korea ranked first. Ironically, though, when asked if they are good at math, 68% of Americans—the most of any country—said they were, while only 23% of the South Korean students said they were good at math—the least of any country. Apparently, says William Bennett, American schools "are a lot better at teaching self-esteem than they are at teaching math."

Like the schools, many churches have been on a self-esteem kick. Preachers and broadcasters promote it like it's the heart of Christianity, when it's really just a recent trend in pop psychology. Churches are helping people to feel better and better about themselves, even as people are becoming worse and worse. Pollster George Gallup summarized the situation this way: "Religion up, morality down." Apparently, churches are better at teaching self-esteem than they are at teaching holiness.

Consumer religion is eager to please. Instead of confronting you with the holy God, it manufactures an idol to suit your preference. Instead of declaring the righteous standards of God's commandments, it lowers the standards so you can feel good about yourself. And instead of warning you to repent and get off the road to hell, it makes your trip down the road to hell as pleasant and comfortable as possible.

The Bible tells how the evil king Ahab was preparing for a great battle, and he went to find out what his chances were. Ahab had prophets he liked and prophets he didn't, so he called in the ones he liked, four hundred of them. They all said, "Go ahead. The Lord will give you victory." But Ahab's ally, King Jehoshaphat, asked for a second opinion: "Isn't there a prophet of the Lord—a real prophet—we can ask?" Ahab said, "There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah" (1 Kings 22:8).

Well, they called Micaiah in, and sure enough, he had nothing good to say. He told Ahab, "The Lord has decreed disaster for you." No wonder Ahab liked the other prophets better! The only problem was that Micaiah was right. When Ahab went off to battle, an arrow pierced a weak spot in his armor, he bled to death, and his army was scattered.

Ahab liked flattery; he didn't like criticism. He liked to think positive; he didn't like to hear about judgment. So Ahab ignored Micaiah and marched to his death, with four hundred positive thinkers encouraging him every step of the way. "There is a way that seems right to a man," says the Bible, "but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 14:12).

Genuine Jesus

Beware of consumer religion! Beware of preachers who tell you only what you want to hear! Listen to someone who speaks the truth of the Bible no matter how people react. Listen to someone who preaches the Word in season and out of season, when people like it and when they don't like it. Listen to someone who loves God enough not to misrepresent him and loves you enough to rebuke you and warn you when you're on the wrong path.

Consumer religion is like going to the mall; Christian religion is like going to the doctor. In the mall of consumer religion, you can shop here and there, taking what you like and leaving the rest. But when you go to the Great Physician of the Christian religion, Jesus Christ, you're no longer a consumer shopping around. You're a sick person in desperate need of healing, and you must take what the Great Physician gives you, whether you happen to like it or not.

Jesus gives us a diagnosis we'd rather not hear: we're sinners. Jesus gives us a prognosis we'd rather not think about: we're bound for hell if we don't change. And Jesus provides a cure we'd rather not accept: his crucified body and shed blood. Jesus told crowds of people who were curious about him, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." This offended people. Many who had followed Jesus for awhile turned away from him. At that point, Jesus said to his inner circle, the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:67-69).

Today, in an age saturated with consumerism, Jesus is often presented in a way that doesn't really offend anyone. You hear a lot about what Jesus can do for you. Whatever your problem, Jesus is the solution; whatever your question, Jesus is the answer. There's a certain amount of truth in this, but the *central* truth you need to know is this: unless you eat Jesus' body and drink his blood, you have no life in you. You need to believe the message of Christ crucified for your salvation. You need to eat the bread and drink the wine through which the Spirit of Christ nourishes people for eternal life. Whatever else the church may do or say, the preaching of Christ crucified and the holy sacrament of participation in his body and blood is the heart of Christian faith.

Does that turn you off the way it turned off the people Jesus was talking to? If so, you can look for something that you find more appealing, but it's going to be a counterfeit. You need the genuine Jesus, not the consumer Christ. You don't need an artificial Jesus, manufactured and packaged to please the customer; you need the Savior crucified for sinners. Who else has the words of eternal life? Who else is the Holy One of God?

So beware of the voices telling you what you want to hear. Listen instead to God's Word telling you what you *need* to hear. If you're not yet a follower of Jesus, don't be fooled by flattery. Repent of your sin, trust in Christ, and join a church where Christ, not the customer, is king.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Come to the one true Savior, and once you come to him, stay alert to ways in which your faith and life can be distorted when churches and religious broadcasters and publishers and singers try too hard to please a certain type of customer. Even those

who believe the Bible and trust the true Savior can be so eager to please people's preferences that they aren't really true to life.

One thing to beware of is sensationalism. We want our faith to be exciting, not boring. We love a sensational story. We're fascinated by people who tell tales of sin and horror before they became Christians, followed by a spectacular, instant conversion and a new life where they're happy and holy 24 hours a day. For example, a man who was wildly popular among Christians as a speaker and author claimed that he led a large group of Satanists before his miraculous conversion to Christ. What a great story! But as it turned out, he never belonged to a group of Satan worshipers at all. He was just lying to make his story more exciting—and by lying he was pleasing Satan as much as if he were a Satan worshiper. Sensationalism sells. The supermarket tabloids and TV shows are proof. But we'd be better off focusing less on sensational stories and focus more on the ordinary ways that God often works in the lives of ordinary Christians.

Another thing to watch out for is over-advertising. Preachers can be so eager to lead people to Christ that they stretch the truth. They promise things which God himself doesn't promise. They talk like all your troubles will disappear the moment you trust Jesus: your addictions will immediately vanish, your depression will be lifted, your diseases will be instantly healed, your financial problems will be replaced with success, and so forth. When you hear all this and put your faith in it and then find that some of your troubles remain, you wonder what went wrong. You wonder why God hasn't kept his promises. But the problem is not that God hasn't kept his promises but that the preacher promised things which God didn't promise.

Sometimes the over-advertising has to do with physical or financial benefits, and sometimes it has to do with spiritual experiences. To hear some preachers and authors, you'd never guess that Christians ever struggle in their souls or have times when they feel far from God. From the sound of it, you'd think that every true Christian senses God's warmth and nearness at every moment and knows at all times exactly what the Holy Spirit is saying. Preachers offer how-to advice on "the victorious life in Christ," giving glowing accounts of how alive and vibrant they feel, and telling you how you can enjoy that same marvelous feeling in a few easy steps. And then, when you don't feel that way, you wonder what's wrong with you.

It all sounds super-spiritual, but it's phony. Instant, holiness and perfect fellowship with God sound appealing—but so do books with titles like *Thin Thighs in Thirty Days*. People are always going to be attracted to quick and easy solutions. But Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey that involves ups and downs, hardships and heartaches, times where God seems distant as well as times when he seems near.

Instead of over-advertising, we need to be honest with each other. The Bible promises heaven in heaven, not heaven on earth. People need to know that Christ can indeed give times of inexpressible joy and make a marvelous difference, but they also need to know that the Christian path sometimes leads through valleys of frustration and spiritual dryness. That message might not sell as well to customers who want instant happiness, but it's more truthful, and in the long run, it will do more good.

Another distortion in consumer religion comes from niche marketing, aiming the gospel at one particular group. People want a church where they "feel comfortable," and they feel most comfortable with people who are like them. Church growth experts say that a church grows fastest when it targets a single racial group, or a particular age

group, such as the baby boomers, or a particular social class, such as professionals, or people who like a particular style of music. Everything is structured to make people in the target group feel comfortable.

But let's not forget: there's more to church than feeling comfortable. Often, God calls us out of our comfort zone. He calls us out of ourselves and into Christ. We may feel most comfortable with people who are exactly like us. But the truth of Jesus and the celebration of his Holy Supper unite people who aren't alike. Jesus breaks down the barriers of social preference. Christian unity doesn't depend on social similarities; it depends on Christ.

The church isn't a shopping center or a social club; it's the body of Christ. So forget consumer religion; follow Jesus. Christ is king; the customer isn't. Remember that.

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