

# The Market-Driven Church: A Look Behind the Scenes\*

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## Part I -- The Market-Driven Church

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

Take the church growth movement for example. Having watched a large segment of the church become content with short yardage and lousy scores, some decided that there had to be a better way. The church was not penetrating society; she was not pulling in the masses; she was not making a significant impact for the gospel. It was not that the church leaders didn't care, it was, it seemed, that they lacked the "know-how," the tools, to effect change. The gospel was still "the power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16), but it was being rejected out-of-hand by too many. What was needed, apparently, were new methods to reach the lost, new techniques to promote the church, new packages for the gospel message. People, we were told, were not rejecting the gospel or Christ; they were rejecting our out-of-date, unappetizing forms, philosophies, and methods. It is these pronouncements that need to be examined.

While we will examine the writing of various individuals who speak for the market-driven movement, we will focus often on the two flagship churches: [Saddleback Valley Community Church](#) in Orange County, California, and [Willow Creek Community Church](#) near Chicago. These churches serve as the models that are reshaping the way we "do church" today. As a matter of fact, many refer to these churches and their clones as "new paradigm churches." Churches all over the world, even those who would claim to reject the church growth movement, are imitating the many methods promoted by Saddleback and the "Creekers." Others have written about church growth, but these two churches have made it "work," and for their success they are idolized and adored by the modern evangelical community.

### The New Paradigm

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

First, we must distinguish between **megachurches** and **new paradigm** churches: Megachurches are defined as those with average worship attendance of 2,000 or more, but these behemoth churches come in all shapes, stripes, and forms. Some are centers of great preaching and teaching, some are charismatic, others are little more than social clubs. New paradigm churches, on the other hand, are identified by a philosophy of ministry *intentionally designed* to effect numerical growth. In their church growth methodologies, more attention is paid to market strategy, business techniques, and demographics than to New Testament instruction. Read the leading literature from the pens of the church growth experts (e.g. *The Purpose Driven Church*, by Rick Warren of Saddleback; *Marketing the Church*, by George Barna and *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry*, by Lee Strobel) and you will find bucket loads of marketing techniques and only passing references to the book of Acts (the divinely inspired "church growth" manual), or to any other Scripture for that matter.

An interesting article, just the type that shapes the new paradigm system, is found in *American Demographics* magazine (*American Demographics*, April 1999, "Choosing My Religion," pp. 60-65, by Richard Cimino and Don Lattin). Several statements from the article are worth quoting since *American Demographic* seems to have its finger on the pulse of Americans' wants and desires. According to this article, people today claim they are:

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

"Congregants," the authors believe, "care as much about a church's childcare services as its doctrinal purity, pay more attention to the style of music than the pastor's theological training" (ibid.). If these things are true, how should the church react? Church marketing consultant Richard Southern encourages us to have:

... an essential paradigm shift in the way church is done, putting the needs of potential customers before the needs of the institutional church. Baby boomers [the inevitable target of new paradigm churches] think of churches like they think of supermarkets, they want options, choices, and convenience. ... Numerous surveys show that Americans are as religious as ever -- perhaps more than ever. ... But what is on the decline is Americans' loyalty to particular denominations or traditions. ... In 1958 only 1 in 25 Americans had left the religious denomination of their upbringing. Today, more than 1 in 2 have left or switched. ... Protestant megachurches have become the evangelical answer to Home Depot, marketing such services as worship, child care, a sports club, 12-step groups, and a guaranteed parking place (ibid., p. 63).

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

Springing from this fountain of demographic "truth" is a whole industry of experts to teach church marketing techniques. One such expert is Christian A. Schwarz, who is the director of the Institute for Natural Church Development. Schwarz claims that between 1994 and 1996, his organization conducted "the most comprehensive research project about the causes of church growth that has ever been conducted in the Christian church ... More than 1,000 churches on all five continents took part in this study" (*The ABC's of Natural Church Development*, by Christian A. Schwarz).

From this mountain of research, Schwarz has observed eight characteristics of growing churches. These are:

... empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism and loving relationships.

Schwarz claims that these principles work in any type of church anywhere in the world, and that if all characteristics are present, these principles **will work every time**:

Every church in which each of the eight quality characteristics has reached a certain level. . . is a growing church. There is qualitative value -- which can be shown in exact statistical terms -- beyond which a church will always grow (ibid., p. 23).

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

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

Which church was a growing church in the book of Revelation -- the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22), which saw itself as rich and wealthy and in need of nothing; or the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11), that was described as poor, in tribulation, and facing great persecution? God said of the Laodicean church that He would spit them out of His mouth, but of the Smyrna church that they would receive the crown of life. The obviously growing church did not please God, while the struggling one did. This is something worth pondering.

## **Who's the Leader of Our Gang?**

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

But is a market-driven church so bad? After all, a lot of people seem to be getting saved and they're really "packing 'em in." Rick Warren puts a positive spin on new paradigm philosophy in his very popular book [\*The Purpose-Driven Church\*](#). Describing the ministry of Saddleback Valley Community Church, Warren ably demonstrates that many church growth principles are simply common sense on the one hand and purposeful, aggressive leadership on the other. -- Churches should pay attention to cleanliness and attractiveness, where people are going to park, and how new people are going to feel walking through our doors. We should strive for excellence and do our best to communicate God's truth. And we should want to grow -- in the right ways. Warren states, "Every church needs to grow warmer through fellowship, deeper through discipleship, stronger through worship, broader through ministry, and larger through evangelism" (*The Purpose-Driven Church*, by Rick Warren, p. 48).

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

Willow Creekers know Harry's interests and passions, his goals and his hang-ups. They understand how his mind works and are doing all they can to make Christianity relevant. Churches that are growing are doing so primarily because they are focusing attention on the lost and visitors. They are churches that have not

become in-grown and comfortable. None of these things are wrong; the problems are in the details. Having detoured around the Bible, the new paradigm churches often look to other sources to develop their systems.

Perhaps no single source carries as much weight in the "seeker-sensitive" church than George Barna and his Barna Research Group. Barna, the church counterpart to George Gallup, has ignited a number of fires in Christian circles with his books such as *The Frog in the Kettle* and *Marketing the Church*. In his more recent book *Church Marketing, Breaking Ground for the Harvest*, Barna declared that he, and his types, have won the ideological battle over the issue of marketing the church (pp. 13,14). That is, only a few old-fashioned stick-in-the-muds still question the validity of the market-driven strategy. Barna defines marketing as:

... a broad term that encompasses all the activities that lead up to an exchange of equally valued goods between consenting parties. ... activities such as advertising, public relations, strategic planning, audience research, product distribution, fund-raising and product pricing, developing a vision statement, and customer service are all elements of marketing. When these elements are combined in a transaction in which the parties involved exchange items of equivalent worth, the marketing act has been consummated (p. 19).

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

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

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

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

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## Part II -- The Little Church Went to the Market

David Wells bemoans concerning the new paradigm church, "Much of it ... is replete with tricks, gadgets, gimmicks, and marketing ploys as it shamelessly adapts itself to our emptied-out, blinded, postmodern world. ... There is too little about it that bespeaks the holiness of God. And without the vision for any reality of this holiness, the gospel becomes trivialized, life loses its depth, God becomes transformed into a product to be sold, faith into a recreational activity to be done, and the Church into a club for the like-minded" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 180). Damaging accusations -- are they true?

The standard rhetoric coming from new paradigm churches is that they teach the same message, the same gospel, as the more traditional evangelical churches, and that they differ only in methodology and philosophy of ministry. Lee Strobel (former Teaching Pastor at [Willow Creek Community Church](#)) writes, "Objections [to the market-driven church] generally relate to the method that's used to communicate the Gospel, not the message itself, and consequently we're free to use our God-given creativity to present Christ's message in new ways that our target audience will connect with" (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched*

*Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, p. 168). This is simply not the case. While some of the methods may disturb us, it is their message that is of real concern.

In Part IV of this series, we will demonstrate that while the new paradigm churches have dressed their gospel in the gown of conservative evangelicalism, it is in reality a masquerade, a costume, that disguises a gospel message that would have been unrecognizable only a few years ago. For now, we need to examine the methodologies for which the new paradigm churches have become famous: their market-driven strategies. After all, that the new paradigm churches are most often known by the handle of "market-driven" is not without reason. We have chosen not to use this label exclusively, because these churches are unique in other ways as well, but their market-driven approach is certainly their outstanding feature.

## What Is a Market-Driven Church?

Some within the market-driven church would cringe at being called such. They would rather be hailed "purpose-driven" (so Rick Warren's influential book [\*The Purpose-Driven Church\*](#)), or "seeker-sensitive" (a.k.a. Bill Hybels). But others, such as George Barna (the most highly regarded marketing researcher in evangelicalism), pull no punches. In works such as *Marketing the Church* and *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing*, Barna outlines for pastors who have not had the privilege of a graduate course in marketing (*A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing*, p. 15), just how it is to be done in the church. As to the debate within evangelical circles concerning marketing, Barna declares it to be over and the marketing gurus have won (pp. 13-14).

If this is true (and as one visits churches all over the country from liberal to conservative and observes their mimicking of market-driven principles, one would have to agree that Barna has a good case), what exactly has been won (or lost, depending upon your view)?

Barna defines marketing as "a broad term that encompasses all of the activities that lead to an exchange of equally valued goods between consenting parties." Barna moves on to give supposed examples of marketing in Scripture, including examples of marketing the gospel (cf. pp. 20,23,77). Unfortunately, in order to support his marketing strategy from Scripture, he must twist its meaning. For example, Barnabas is given as an example of a marketing strategy (p. 23). Barna writes, "Barnabas successfully tackled a tough marketing or PR assignment when he overcame the early disciples' fear of Paul, convincing them he was no longer a persecutor of the church" (Acts 9:26,27) (p. 23). Jesus also owed His fame to marketing, according to Barna (p. 23), because word of mouth is "the world's most effective advertising." By his definition, all proclamation of any Christian message is an act of marketing. He is then saying that all churches market, but some do not know it; the new paradigm churches simply have taken marketing to a new level.

But the marketing philosophy is a very different approach from the methods found in Scripture -- to spread the good news. Is the gospel marketable by Barna's definition? Is the gospel the "exchange of equally valued goods between consenting parties?" Hardly. The gospel is offered by grace (undeserved favor) and received by faith. In the exchange, God gets us, we get Him (equally valued goods?). In the exchange we receive the righteousness of Christ, He takes our sins upon Himself (equally valued goods?). When the "product" is Christ the market process breaks down in its very definition.

But is Christ the product of the market-driven approach? Barna would say yes, but note his explanation: "Ministry, in essence, has the same objective as marketing: to meet people's needs. Christian ministry, by definition, meets people's real needs by providing them with biblical solutions to their life circumstances" (p. 21). Although not so stated, I am certain if questioned Barna would say we meet people's real need by bringing them to Christ (please keep in mind that "ministry" to the new paradigm churches, which have become evangelistic centers, means their efforts to bring Unchurched Harry to Christ). But is the purpose of the gospel to meet the felt-needs of people? Is that why Christ came? (See Part III) We strongly protest such an understanding of the gospel.

The gospel is not bringing people to Christ in order to meet their felt needs. ***According to Scripture, the gospel is the good news that lost sinners can be forgiven of their sins and receive the righteousness of Christ in exchange.*** This is the real need of humanity, the need for which Christ died. The new paradigm church would have no problem agreeing that Harry's true need is salvation from sin. But they do not believe that Harry will respond to such a gospel unless we dress it up with other enticing offers. Felt needs is the porthole, they believe, through which Harry is reached in order that his true spiritual need is met. According to their marketing research, Harry is not interested in truth (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, p. 56); therefore, he does not react well to "Thus sayeth the Lord" (Ibid., p. 50). And Harry is not interested in the future (including heaven) (Ibid., p. 57); therefore, reaching him through concern for his eternal destiny is futile. What Harry is interested in is feeling better about himself. He is asking, "What can help me deal with my pain" (Ibid., p. 56); he is interested in "his marriage, his friendships, his career, his recovery from past pain and so on" (Ibid., pp. 58, 59). Unchurched Mary, for her part, is attracted to churches, "Where women have access to leadership and influence" (Ibid., 76), (i.e. an equalitarian approach). If we are to reach this generation, we must then "market" the gospel as something that works (i.e. relieves pain and provides happiness).

"The most effective messages for seekers are those that address their felt-needs" (Ibid., pp. 213-214). However, this approach is not drawn from Scripture; it is drawn from market research and the latest in pop-psychology. No one denies that there are many benefits to the Christian life, but these benefits must not be confused with the gospel. The gospel is not about helping Harry feel better about himself and his circumstances; it is about his rebelliousness against a holy God who will ultimately condemn him to hell if he does not repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins. The distinction between the market-driven approach and the Biblical approach lies largely in understanding this fundamental difference.

## Market Evaluation

Given the obvious fact that market-driven methodology works (almost all of the biggest and fastest growing churches in America have hopped aboard the market-driven train), and granted that we are a pragmatic people who worship at the feet of the goddess success, what serious flaws could be found in the movement? Below are some things to consider.

### ***Big is good, small is bad; or where have all the people gone?***

Most churches in America are small. Fifty percent of churches average fewer than 75 attendees on any given Sunday, and only 5 percent attract more than 350, according to Barna's surveys. These statistics are not denied; it's their interpretation that is in question. Church growth gurus use these figures to prove that the church has lost its edge -- she is not making a significant impact on society. But is this the case? David Wells shares his thoughts: "A century ago, in 1890 ... the average Protestant church had only 91.5 members, not all of whom would have been in attendance on any given Sunday; a century before that, in 1776, the average Methodist congregation had 75.7 members. It seems to be the case that our churches today are about the same size as they have always been, on average, and the supposition that we are now experiencing drastic shrinkage needs to be clearly justified before it can be allowed to become the premise for new and radical strategies" (*God in the Wasteland*, by David Wells, p. 78). As a matter of fact, church attendance in 1937 averaged 41% of the population, whereas it was 42% in 1988, (close to 50% in the late 50s and 43% in 1999 according to *Christianity Today*, July 10, 2000, p. 20), leading Wells to comment, "Barna's efforts to make megachurches the benchmark of normality and then to argue that churches of conventional size are failures is simply unwarranted and wrongheaded" (*God in the Wasteland*, p. 79).

It doesn't take a mathematician to realize that if the percentage of Americans going to church has remained constant, yet megachurches are popping up almost weekly, then the giant churches are largely being populated by folks funneling in from small churches. Just as Wal-marts are killing mom and pop department stores, chain restaurants and groceries are doing the same in their respective venues, and the Mall has demolished "downtown," so the megachurches are doing a number on the small church. But large

does not necessarily mean better, and when all the numbers are tallied, overall church attendance (on a percentage basis) is not increasing despite the methods championed by these megachurches.

### ***Who needs God, we have a program?***

We are certainly in danger of reductionism, but when such faith can be held in the marketing methodology, little room is left, or needed, for faith in God. In what has to be one of the most blatant examples of the self-sufficiency of marketing is the claim that the salvation of souls has a price tag. Barna suggests that a church might set an objective to "lead 50 baby busters to Christ this year, for under \$5000 in program expenditures" (Barna, p. 170). So for \$100 per head, we can bring people to Christ. The need for prayer and trust in a sovereign God becomes questionable when we can statistically figure what it costs to bring a soul to the Lord. In Barna's defense, this "souls/dollar" strategy is not new. Both Charles Finney and Billy Sunday could predict to the penny what it cost to win a soul. Their cost however ran between \$2 and \$3 a head -- quite a bargain as compared to today. But of course, if you factor in inflation, you can apparently still win a soul pretty inexpensively.

Or take the church-growth consultant who boldly claims that "five to ten million baby boomers would be back in the fold within a month if churches adopted three simple changes: 1. Advertise 2. Let people know about product benefits 3. Be nice to new people (See *Dining with the Devil*, by Os Guinness, p. 38). The belief in the omnipotence of marketing techniques is changing the nature of the church.

### ***The Consumer is King***

The premise of all marketing is that the consumer must be pleased; he must be kept happy; he must be given what he needs, or has been programmed to think he needs, if we are to succeed. This premise works very well for say, McDonald's, but can it be adopted by the church? Certainly it can, but is not the church, and more importantly, the gospel message, altered and distorted in the process? Listen to these words by Wells, "The fact is that while we may be able to market the church, we cannot market Christ, the gospel, Christian character, or meaning in life. The church can offer handy childcare to weary parents, intellectual stimulation to the restless video generation, a feeling of family to the lonely and dispossessed -- and, indeed, lots of people come to churches for these reasons. But neither Christ nor his truth can be marketed by appealing to consumer interest, because the premise of all marketing is that the consumer's need is sovereign, that the customer is always right and this is precisely what the gospel insists cannot be the case" (Wells, p. 82).

Even the liberal *New Yorker* magazine sees a problem with today's audience-driven preaching, "The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into the marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future" (As quoted by Guinness, p. 59).

### ***But What if the Consumer Changes?***

The following two quotes are worthy of pondering: "He who marries the spirit of the age soon becomes a widower." "To be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal" (Guinness, p. 63). What happens when the fickle consumer changes his interests, or develops new wants, as he inevitably will? Will today's cutting edge pastor suddenly find himself stampeded by the herd tomorrow? In order to avoid such a tragedy, must he keep his ear to the ground of modern marketing techniques? Will he become a slave to polls and surveys? And how does all of this affect his use of the Scriptures? We don't have to have a crystal ball to answer these questions; all we have to do is look behind us.

The church has always fought, and too often lost, the battle with its age. Parallels with today are plentiful. For example, the "Downgrade Controversy" of Spurgeon's time ultimately led to the liberalization of the

evangelical churches of England. In our own country, we think back to the early nineteenth-century changes that came about through the revivalism movement, best known by some as "Finneyism". Guinness sees this as an important precedent, because as in our time, the change was not "so much from Calvinism to Arminianism as from theology to experience, from truth to technique, from elites to populism, and from an emphasis on 'serving God' to an emphasis on 'servicing the self' in serving God" (Guinness, p. 27).

Some are still alive who experienced the great Fundamental/Modernist battle of the first half of the last century, in which the big names of the church invited us to court the spirit of the age. The fad was so popular that almost every major denomination in America eventually married that spirit and moved away from Biblical Christianity. It was at that point that new fundamentalist denominations, churches, schools, and associations were formed. It is these very institutions that are now flirting with the spirit of our age. The results are predictable.

Origen, in the third century, taught that "Christians are free to 'plunder the Egyptians' but forbidden to 'set up a golden calf' from the spoils" (Guinness., pp. 30,31). Easily said, but as history has proven, almost impossible to implement.

Another writer summarizes things well, "By the time we are finished, we have entirely transformed the communion of saints. We did not even have to officially jettison the Bible, as the modernists did earlier this century. We did not have to say that Scripture failed to provide answers for the modern world or speak to the real needs of contemporary men and women, as the liberals said. All we had to do was to allow the world to define the church instead of allowing the Word to define it" (*The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong, "Recovering the Plumb Line," p. 254).

## Summary

When we speak of marketing the church, we are not referencing such things as advertising church events, providing excellence in church programming, being kind to visitors, or providing ample parking. No one is arguing the importance and value of such things. Marketing, as defined by the new paradigm churches, goes much further, because its focus is on what the consumer (Unchurched Harry) wants and thinks he needs, rather than on what God wants and what He says Harry needs. In other words, market-driven churches are built upon the foundation of polls, surveys, and the latest marketing techniques, instead of upon the Word of God. In order to market a church to the unsaved, the consumer must be given what he wants.

Since unsaved consumers do not desire God, or the things of God, they have to be enticed by something else. Thus, the temptation then arises for a church to change, or at least hide, who they are so that they appeal to Unchurched Harry. Additionally, the church is tempted to alter its message to correspond with what Harry wants to hear and thinks he needs. The end result is a felt-need gospel that appeals to Harry's fallen nature in an effort to entice him to come to Christ, the ultimate felt-need supplier, so that he is fulfilled and feels better about himself. But, "Can churches really hide their identity without losing their religious character? Can the church view people as consumers without inevitably forgetting that they are sinners? Can the church promote the gospel as a product and not forget that those who buy it must repent? Can the church market itself and not forget that it does not belong to itself but to Christ? Can the church pursue success in the market place and not lose its biblical faithfulness" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 202)? The answers to these questions are self-evident.

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## Part III -- I Feel a Need Coming On

### We Are Driven

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, has written the definitive book promoting the market-driven concept of evangelism and church growth. [\*The Purpose-Driven Church\*](#), which admittedly has a considerable amount of practical and helpful advice, nevertheless is laced with a felt-need philosophy that undermines, in my opinion, the value of the whole book. It is Warren's view that in order to reach the lost we must begin with their felt needs (p. 197ff). He writes, "[For] anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart" (p.219). In order to discover the felt needs of the Saddleback Valley citizens, he orchestrated a community survey of the unchurched (p.139). Once those needs were discovered, a program was implemented to reach the community by offering Jesus Christ, the gospel, and the church as a means of fulfilling those needs. Warren is so committed to this approach that written into the bylaws of Saddleback is this sentence, "This church exists to benefit the residents of the Saddleback Valley by providing for their spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual and social needs" (p.220).

In support of this philosophy, Warren does a couple of things. First, he offers Jesus' example as a model for reaching the lost through the felt needs porthole (see pp. 197ff). Unfortunately for Warren's position, the passages he uses are misunderstood, misapplied, and simply do not teach that Jesus reached the lost through felt needs. Quite the contrary, in Jesus' evangelism He always quickly got to the heart of the real need of his audience -- their sin which separated them from God (e.g. John 3; 4; Mark 10:17-31) (in contrast to loneliness, poor [self-esteem](#), lack of fulfillment, etc). Next, Warren defends himself by stating, "Beginning a message with people's felt needs is more than a marketing tool! It is based on the theological fact that God chooses to reveal himself to man according to *our* needs" (p.295). Warren offers no theological proof for this assertion of course, for there is none. The apostles would be absolutely dumbfounded to find their "God-centered" teachings twisted to make them so "man-centered."

This needs-oriented approach to the Christian life is so prevalent within the seeker-sensitive camp that the little jingle, "Find a need and meet it, find a hurt and heal it" has become the unofficial motto. Os Guinness observes, "Few would disagree that church-growth teaching represents a shift from the vertical dimension to the horizontal, from the theological to the practical, from the prophetic to the seeker-friendly, from the timeless to the relevant and contemporary, from the primacy of worship to the primacy of evangelism, and from the priority of Christian discipleship in all of life to the priority of spiritual ministries within the church. But what happens when the much-heralded new emphases are seen from the standpoint of the Scriptures to be quite simply wrong? And what happens if tomorrow's 'need' is for what is overlooked today" (*Dining with the Devil*, by Os Guinness, p. 84)?

Continuing with Guinness' line of questions, we might ask: What are the new paradigm churches really offering that is attracting great throngs of people? Is this offering the same old message (the Biblical message) in new wrapping, or is it a mutation of the real thing? And if it proves to be a mutation, what effect is it having, and will it have on the modern church?

## **The New Message**

A. W. Tozer warned decades ago of a new wind spanning across the fields of the evangelical church:

If I see aright, the cross of popular evangelicalism is not the cross of the New Testament. It is, rather, a new bright ornament upon the bosom of a self-assured and carnal Christianity. The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it.

In Part IV of this report we will examine the gospel message itself. We now want to look at the corollary and overlapping issue of mankind's need(s). What has happened, I believe, is this: the evangelical church has become a reflector of our times rather than a revealer. "The problem is not that Christians have disappeared, but that Christian faith has become so deformed. Under the influence of modernity, we modern Christians are literally capable of winning the world while losing our own souls" (Guinness, p. 43).

## A Personal Tale

How has this happened? What has changed our message from a force to a farce? A large part of the answer lies in the almost wholesale embracing of [psychology](#) by the Christian community. Following is Gary Gilley's experience.

My first encounter with the encroachment of psychology upon the church was my senior year of Bible college in 1972. As I prepared for the pastorate at Moody Bible Institute, I had been immersed in the study of Scripture and theology. As a senior I was required to take a course in "pastoral counseling," which proved to be almost identical to a course in psychology that I had taken at the University of Virginia. That same year I was asked, along with several others, to be a RA in the dorm. As part of our preparation we were given training in the latest rage of pop-psychology, which by the way has since been relegated to the psychological junk heap. At the time I remember my wide-eyed amazement that all my studies in Scripture apparently did not equip me to deal with the real problems that would face me in my future ministry. Bible study and knowledge were great for salvation and sanctification, but there apparently existed a set of problems and needs "out there" that needed more than the "simplistic" solutions as found in God's Word. Scripture, after all the dust had cleared, needed help from [Freud](#).

Unable and ill-equipped to deal with my newfound knowledge, I tucked it away for safekeeping. Later, in the early days of pastoring, I decided to pursue a master's degree in psychology in order to help people with their "real" problems. But it soon became abundantly clear that something was seriously wrong. Virtually everything that I learned in my psychology courses contradicted the Scriptures. So, I ended my illustrious career as a would-be pastor/psychologist and went back to the study of Scripture, which has proven itself more than adequate throughout the years for every need and concern that has come my way. Meanwhile, immersed in my own ministry and the study of Scripture, I was somehow oblivious to psychology's hijacking of the evangelical church during the 1970s and 1980s. One day I awoke, sort of a Rip Van Wrinkle experience, to find that my world, the world of the church, had changed, and I had been left behind. Where had everyone gone? Most churches were now talking about dysfunctional families, [poor self-images](#), [co-dependency](#), [addictions](#), [12-step programs](#), and needs -- lots and lots of needs that the church was supposed to meet. More "Christians" were obtaining their philosophy for living from Oprah and Sally Jesse than from Jesus and Paul.

When "Christian" leaders saw this metamorphosis of God's people, a metamorphosis that they had helped create, they could either pull in the reins, denounce this caricature of the Christian faith and repent of their part in its birth, or they could jump on the float and join the parade. Most, recognizing that this is what the people now wanted, what they expected, what they had been trained to "need," choose the float approach. Give Christians the need-oriented pop-psychology that they had grown to love, they decided, just alter it a bit with a little Scripture and some references to Jesus -- they would never catch on that what they were swallowing was not Biblical Christianity at all, but an almost unrecognizable perversion. Whether this approach was calculated or naively taken matters little, the result is the same: a psychologized Christian community which no longer recognizes the difference between the teachings of Scripture and the [teachings of Carl Rogers](#), and no longer cares.

Since the Christian was now indistinguishable in philosophy from the world, both having fallen in love with psychobabble, the offense of the cross became far less offensive. It was only a short step for someone (Robert Schuller is a worthy candidate as we will see) to develop a psychologized church for the already psychologized Unchurched Harry (as the Willow Creekers call him). This would be a church that would offer the same things to Harry that secular society offered, only better, since Jesus was better than a Carl Rogers, Oprah, and Freud combined. And so it was -- "The new paradigm churches, then, appear to be succeeding, not because they are offering an alternative to our modern culture, but because they are speaking with its voice, mimicking its moves" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 32).

## A Little History

The church growth movement owes much to [Robert Schuller](#), who claims to be its founder, at least in this country, by being the first to launch the marketing approach in Christianity. "The secret of winning unchurched people into the church," Schuller said, "is really quite simple. Find out what would impress the non-churched in your community" then give it to them (as quoted in *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, by G.S. Pritchard, p. 51). Believing that expository preaching is a waste of time, and borrowing the philosophy of his mentor [Norman Vincent Peale](#), Schuller "began to communicate a message of Christianity that focused on meeting the emotional and psychological needs of people" (Pritchard, p. 53). Schuller laid out his philosophy of ministry in his 1982 book [Self Esteem: The New Reformation](#), in which he called for a radical shift in the church's focus from God to human needs. The most important issue before Schuller was to determine through some means what was the deepest human need upon which the church should focus. He decided that mankind's deepest need was self-esteem, a "need," by the way, nowhere mentioned, alluded to, or even hinted at in the Scriptures. He then went on to wrap his theology and church growth strategy around this all-important need. Originally, Schuller's church growth philosophy met with scorn and denunciation by conservative Christians everywhere. But while Christian leaders held the theological front against need-oriented Christianity they were out-flanked by pragmatism. It just so happened that Schuller's methodology worked, and those who employed it were seeing exponential numerical growth in their churches. In most arenas, truth doesn't stand a chance against success; this proved to be the case in the church growth wars.

If Robert Schuller was the architect of the user-friendly church, then [Bill Hybels](#), pastor of Willow Creek Community church, became the contractor. Working from the premise that, "The most effective messages for seekers are those that address their felt need" (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, pp. 214,215) it remained for Hybels and company to determine which felt needs most needed attention. Leading the pack, Hybels decided it was not self-esteem, although he did not reject it, but rather personal fulfillment (or the pursuit of happiness) followed by identity, companionship, marriage, family, relief of stress, meaning and morality (ibid., pp. 70-73). To Hybels, fulfillment was the felt need that encompassed and defined all others.

Since, to the founders of the new paradigm church, felt needs are the driving force behind the actions and attitudes of people, and since Christianity, Hybels would argue, is the best means to solve problems and satisfy the desire for fulfillment (ibid., p. 143), he developed the gospel of personal fulfillment. According to the research book *Willow Creek Seeker Services* by G. A. Pritchard, the canon within the canon at Willow Creek is that human beings can be fulfilled. Fulfillment permeates every venue at Willow Creek, even leading to a redefinition of sin. "Instead of only portraying sin as selfishness and a rebellion against God, Hybels also describes it as a flawed strategy to gain fulfillment" (ibid., p. 177).

It should be noted that while this felt need strategy is not derived from Scripture, coming clearly from secular psychology, it nevertheless would become the foundation of the new paradigm church.

## The Repercussions

The result of psychology's invasion of our culture has been, as R. Albert Mohler, Jr. noticed, that "Americans are now fanatic devotees of the cult of self-fulfillment and personal autonomy" (*The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong, 'Evangelical': What's in a Name?" by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., p. 40). The role of the church has been to challenge the spirit of the age, for as Wells points out, "The church is in the business of truth, not profit" (*God in the Wasteland*, by David Wells, p. 76). Unfortunately, "the healers of our time -- psychotherapists and advertisers -- have extended their long reach into the life of the church as well. Our secular healers have populated the Church with their close cousins" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 197). Even "the language of theology has been replaced by the vocabulary of the therapeutic" (Mohler).

These new cousins have affected every aspect of church life. Take worship for example -- New paradigm pastor Wes Dubin goes on the offensive when his entertainment oriented worship services are challenged. "It (worship) is not all gloom and doom," he states, "and all of us take our Bibles and just bore each other;

let's show them that we can also have fun" (*In the Name of God*, video with Peter Jennings). There is a time for fun in the church but surely, "the purpose of worship is clearly to express the greatness of God and not simply to find inward release or, still less, amusement. Worship is theological rather than psychological" (*Losing Our Virtue*, p. 40).

And then there is the issue of sin. In a psychological world, sin is reduced to sickness and addiction. [The sinner is not seen as depraved, but as a victim](#). What is then lost is our capacity to understand life, and ourselves, as sinful. When the seeker-sensitive church adopts the language and theology of psychology, it then attempts to dispense psychological prescriptions for life's issues rather than Biblical ones, for after all, it reasons, the world now thinks within the framework of psychology and we must be relevant. Rather than challenge and confront the world's wisdom, the modern church is seeking to sanctify it. The result is, as the prophet Jeremiah warned in his day, "They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially" (Jeremiah 6:14).

The emphasis on psychology is also changing the focus of the church. Pritchard is right when he says, "Instead of looking at God's face, this teaching suggests that individuals look in the distorted mirror of modern psychology" (Pritchard, p. 233). Pritchard claims that when he attended the church (*ibid.*, pp. 227, 235), the majority of the books sold in Willow Creek's bookstore were psychological and self-help books, with the decidedly anti-Christian *Codependent No More* by Melody Beattie the top seller. This accentuation on psychology, "instead of encouraging Creekers to know and love God, encourages them to know and accept themselves and develop a strong self-esteem. The goals and means of one's ethics change from a God-centered to a human-centered orientation. ... Willow Creek Christians have accepted the psychological framework as foundational to their self-understanding and as a trustworthy guide for daily living" (Pritchard, p. 234).

Pritchard's assessment of the psychological influence at Willow Creek is lethal. "Ironically, while Hybels is evangelizing those in the world toward Christianity, he is also evangelizing Christians toward the world. As the unchurched Harrys in the audience (10 percent) move closer to Christianity, the Christians in the audience (90 percent) are often becoming more psychological and worldly. ... In the effort to become relevant Willow Creek ironically is in danger of becoming irrelevant" (Pritchard, p. 238-239 -- Percentages of Christians and non-Christians attending Willow Creek are estimates based upon the author's research).

Pritchard's critique of the need-oriented approach to "doing church" is worthy of quoting extensively:

The unintended consequences of this approach are that Hybels incorporates large chunks of the American psychological worldview into his basic teaching and teaches that fulfillment is a consequence of the Christian life. There is a lack of critical evaluation to Willow Creek's approach to relevance. This felt-need approach to relevance ultimately distorts their Christianity.

A more biblical approach to the current American fixation with fulfillment is to call it the *idolatry* that it is. Jesus does not guarantee that to follow him will make one fulfilled. In fact, at several points, the direct opposite is communicated: "I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:19); "I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34); "If they persecuted me they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). The temptation to say that Christianity will meet all one's needs and provide fulfillment is not true to biblical Christianity (Pritchard, p. 200 -- emphasis mine).

Willow Creek's unintended failures result from an uncritical use of various cultural tools and ideas (marketing, psychology, media). In particular, their mistakes are rooted in a superficial understanding of the American culture and an inadequate grasp of Christian theology (Pritchard, p. 207).

The seeker-sensitive experts would defend marketing as a tool they use to attract more Unchurched Harrys to hear the gospel. Methods change, the message stays the same, is the cliché. What they naively do not seem to understand is that the message will ultimately be shaped by the method. This is especially true of marketing, since it "shapes how one views the world. People become 'consumers' and 'target audiences.'

These consumers have 'felt needs,' which 'research' discovers in order to modify the 'product' to meet these needs" (Pritchard, p. 244).

There exists a subtle yet important difference between the New Testament church and the new paradigm church. The church, the New Testament teaches, is to glorify God and instruct people on how to please Him. In the process, needs may very well be met, but the purpose of the church is not to meet people's needs (except for the need for godliness). In the modern church, needs reign; God exists to meet Harry's needs. Harry comes to Christ, not to glorify Him, but to find the promised fulfillment and happiness in this life. When Harry is attracted through a felt-need philosophy, he will not be retained when that approach is no longer used. In other words, if Harry is drawn to the church in order to *get*, in order to satisfy his flesh, he is not likely to stay around when and if he discovers that Christ calls for him to lose his life for Christ's sake (Matthew 16:25). The result is that churches which have been built on the quagmire of the superficial must remain superficial if they hope to retain their Harrys and Marys.

## Summary

David Wells asked the right question of these seeker-sensitive churches, "Does the Church have the courage to become relevant by becoming biblical? Is it willing to break with the cultural habits of the time and propose something quite absurd, like recovering both the word and the meaning of sin?" (*Losing Our Virtue*, p. 199)? "I fear that the seeds of a full-blown liberalism have now been sown, and in the next generation they will surely come to maturity" (ibid., p. 205). I agree with the closing sentence in *Losing Our Virtue*, "We need the faith of the ages, not the reconstructions of a therapeutically driven or commercially inspired faith. And we need it, not least, because without it our postmodern world will become starved for the Word of God" (ibid., p. 209).

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## Part IV -- The New Gospel

Counterfeit money is recognized by those who know how to identify the real thing. Before we examine the gospel message found in the new paradigm churches, it would be best to examine the gospel message found in the Bible. The gospel message in a nutshell is this: Harry (to use Willow Creek's name for the unsaved) is a sinner, in full-blown rebellion against God (Rom. 3:23; 5:1-12). While some Harrys are outwardly religious and some even desire the gifts and benefits that God can supply, no Harrys truly seek after God or desire Him (Rom. 3:10-18). As a result of Harry's sinfulness, he is under the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18), faces future judgment (Heb. 9:27), will die both physically and spiritually (Rom. 6:23), and will spend eternity in hell (Rev. 20:11-15).

It is because of Harry's hopeless plight, and the fact that he can do nothing to redeem himself in God's eyes (Titus 3:5), that Jesus Christ (through grace alone, not because of Harry's value and worth, Eph. 2:8) became a man, died on the cross (Rom. 5:8) (thus taking Harry's sin upon Himself and satisfying the wrath of God, Heb. 2:17), and was resurrected from the dead in order that Harry could be saved from his sin and have the righteousness of Christ imputed to him (Rom 4). While all of this is a gift from God, Harry obtains that gift through the exercise of faith (Eph 2:8,9) -- purely taking God at his word, trusting that God will save him if only he truly believes.

While many within the seeker-sensitive stable would ascribe to most of the above definition for the gospel, in reality, this is not how the gospel is being presented to Harry. Rather, Harry is being told that precisely because he is so valuable to God that He sent His Son to die for him (a denial of grace, cf. Hebrews 1-2, which lays out the case for God's grace through the unique method of showing that Christ did not die for angels who are of greater value than man, but he died for man -- by grace alone). Harry is being told that if he will come to Christ, Christ will meet all of his felt needs and that will lead to personal fulfillment. Harry

is then being asked to trust in Christ, the great "Needs-Meeter," who will end his search for a life of happiness and fulfillment.

This, I suggest, is not the gospel at all, but the "Gospel of Me," the "Gospel of Self-Fulfillment," the "New Gospel." "We must never confuse our desire for people to accept the Gospel," Oswald Chambers warned long ago, "with creating a Gospel that is acceptable to people." "How we define the problem will define our gospel. If the 'big problem' in the universe is my lack of self-esteem, the gospel will be 'finding the neat person inside of yourself.' If the great question is 'How can we fix society?' the gospel will be a set of moral agendas complete with a list of approved candidates. But how often do we discuss the 'big problem' as defined by Scripture? That problem is the wrath of God" (*The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, Edited by John Armstrong, "Recovering the Plumb Line," p. 256).

## **Harry Would Come to Church But ...**

The reason Unchurched Harry is unchurched is, to the market-driven proponents, a matter of Harry being a fallen creature who has rejected God and has little, if any, attraction toward the things of God. Right? No, not at all. Rather, Harry would love to come to church, and ultimately receive Christ, if only the church would learn to market and present its product better. Lee Strobel, former teaching pastor at Willow Creek, now with Saddleback Community, assures us that marketing studies have shown that "Harry has rejected church, but that doesn't necessarily mean he has rejected God" (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, p. 45). Yet, the Scriptures are very clear that mankind does reject God (Rom. 3:10-18; 5:1-12; I Cor. 1:18ff). What surveys show is that people have not rejected the gods of their own creation and imagination -- but they do not seek the true God.

Actually what we learn, from marketing studies, is that the real reason Harry doesn't come to church is because church is boring, predictable, irrelevant, money hungry (ibid. p. 80), and does not meet his needs (ibid. p. 58). The new paradigm church operates under the credo that Harry is "Hostile to the church, friendly to Jesus Christ" (ibid. p. 47). They "have the misconception that to win the world to Christ we must first win the world's favor. If we can get the world to like us, they will embrace our Savior. The expressed design of the user-friendly philosophy is to make unconverted sinners feel comfortable with the Christian message" (*Reckless Faith*, p. 52).

## **Reaching Harry with the Gospel**

It is clear, when one studies Scripture rather than marketing surveys, that the seeker-sensitive church's gospel message is flawed at its roots -- it has a faulty anthropology. It views Harry as attracted, even friendly with God, but turned off by the out-dated methods of the church. Once that premise is accepted, the methodologies of the user-friendly church are logical. All that remains is to discover what Harry wants in a church, and in a God, and give it to him in an attractive package. In other words, make him an offer he can't refuse. On the negative side, we must understand that "Unchurched Harry doesn't respond well to someone who predicates a command on, "Thus sayeth the Lord"" (ibid. p. 50). Nor is the way to Harry's heart through the porthole of truth. For, you see, Harry is a pragmatist; his question is, does Christianity work (ibid. p. 56)? Harry is also an existentialist; "Experience -- not evidence -- is their mode of discovery" (ibid. p. 59).

Now that we know that Harry is not motivated by the commands of God, nor is he all that interested in truth, we can abandon the direct approach. And since he is looking for something that will help him reach his goals in life and to feel good in the process, we are ready to package the gospel to draw his attention. The new paradigm church does this by focusing on the gospel of felt need. "The Church's problem today is simply that it does not believe that, without tinkering, the Gospel will be all that interesting to modern people" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 207). And so tinker it must.

## **The Gospel of Felt Need**

From psychology, the seeker-sensitive church has discovered that both baby boomers and busters have:

Learned to expect that their needs should be met, jobs would be provided, money would be available, and problems would be solved. The result is a generation of young adults who want and expect everything right away. Life is to be lived for the present. There is little awareness of a philosophy that says we should make long-range plans, or work hard today so things will be better tomorrow. This is a 'now' generation that has little interest in any religion that talks about sacrifices, heaven, or 'the sweet by-and-by.' They want to hear about a faith that works now and brings immediate results (Strobel, p. 57).

If this is true, how are we to proclaim the gospel to a pampered, self-centered generation that demands society meet their every whim? Previous generations, including Biblical ones, would use these traits to point to evidence of sin in Harry's life. They would call Harry to repentance from such a lifestyle, and to faith in Christ for forgiveness of such sins. Then they would challenge new-believer Larry to abandon his self-centeredness, call for a life of self-sacrifice, humbly allowing the Spirit of God to transform him into Christlikeness.

But the modern church sees it differently. Strobel writes, "Our challenge, then, is to help this new generation of Unchurched Harry's understand that Christianity does work, that is, that the God of the Bible offers us supernatural wisdom and assistance in our struggles, difficulties, and recovery from past hurts" (ibid.). Strobel is suggesting that "this new generation" is unlike the past generations, and therefore must be reached differently than the past. What worked at one time simply does not speak to today's Harry. Wells has nailed down the prevailing attitude when he writes, "What our culture suggests is that all of the greatest treasures of life are at hand, quite simply, in the self. Religious man was born to be saved, but psychological man was born to be pleased. 'I believe' has been replaced by 'I feel.' The problem is that we have not been feeling so well recently" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 107).

There is just enough truth in Strobel's statement to throw most of us off guard. Does Christianity work? Does God offer wisdom and help during times of struggle? Certainly, but is this the gospel? Is the good news that Christ died for our sins in order to free us from the wrath of God and impute to us the righteousness of Christ; or is the good news that Christ died in order that we might feel better about ourselves and have our felt needs met? These are two separate gospels.

A few more quotes from Strobel's book will help identify exactly what the new paradigm church is offering the unbeliever. "We baby boomers aren't coming to church to become members," said one pastor, himself a boomer. "We are coming to *experience* something. Yes, even to *get* something" (Strobel, p. 71 -- emphasis in the original). What is it that Harry wants to experience? Strobel supplies some examples. "If you discover that unchurched Harry suffers from a sagging self-esteem... you can tell him how your own self-esteem has soared ever since you learned how much you matter to God" (ibid. p. 92). Never mind that the [concept of self-esteem is foreign to Scripture](#), even anti-Scriptural; never mind that the real issue that Harry struggles with, according to the Bible, is pride, not low self-esteem; the gospel is now gift-wrapped to offer Harry what he has been conditioned to believe he needs.

Not everybody is in need of an ego boost however; some are looking for thrills, excitement, and adventure. Fortunately for the quick-minded evangelist, the gospel resembles a chameleon, taking whatever shade is needed. Strobel assures such thrill-seekers that he "learned that there is nothing more exciting, more challenging, and more adventure-packed than living as a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. What I found is that there's a big difference, between *thrills* and *thrills that fulfill*" (ibid. p. 124 -- emphasis in the original).

So now Jesus Christ can be offered as the big thrill, the ultimate in excitement. Not only is this a misrepresentation of Christ, but it just does not square with the facts. I wonder how thrilled the saints described in Hebrews 11:36-38 were as they were mocked, beaten, put to death, became homeless, and lived in holes in the ground. The new paradigm church is offering a purely Americanized, yuppie brand of Christianity found nowhere in the New Testament. "Much of the Gospel presented today befits less the God

of the ages than a fairy Godmother -- offering people by God's hand what they've been unable to achieve for themselves: wealth, fame, comfort, and security" (Wayne Jacobsen as quoted from *Leadership*, Vol. IV, #1, p. 50).

## The Gospel of Fulfillment

G. A. Pritchard, after spending a year studying the ministry at Willow Creek, eventually came to the conclusion that "Hybels' believes that Harry's most important concern is for his personal fulfillment.... Hybels teaches that Christianity will satisfy Harry's felt needs and provide fulfillment.... Hybels and the other speakers do not condemn the search for fulfillment. Rather they argue that Harry has not searched in the right place. The question remains the same, but the answer has been changed. Harry asks, 'How can I be happy?' 'Accept Jesus, answers Hybels'" (*Willow Creek Seeker Services* by G. A. Pritchard, p. 250). Pritchard's analysis is on the money,

Is Willow Creek correct in their teaching that a relationship with Christ will provide a life of fulfillment? In a word, no. ... Personal fulfillment is the dominant goal of the vast majority of Americans. In this context it is a great temptation for American evangelicals to argue that Christianity is a means to fulfillment and the church becomes another place that promises to satisfy emotional desires. ... To argue for Christianity primarily by pointing to its usefulness in satisfying felt needs is to ultimately undercut it. To teach Christianity as a means eventually teaches that it is superfluous. If someone is able to satisfy his or her felt needs without Christ, the message of Christianity can be discarded. ... The bottom line why individuals should repent and worship God is because God deserves it. Fulfillment theology does not reflect the teaching of the Bible. We find in Scripture vast evidence that Christianity is often not "fulfilling," Jesus promises his disciples that "in this world you will have trouble."... The Lord did not promise fulfillment, or even relief, in this world, but only in the next... . Fulfillment is not a spiritual birthright of Christians. The goal of a Christian's life is faithfulness, not fulfillment (Pritchard, p. 254-256).

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, attempting to examine modern Christianity, "suggests that in contemporary America, God has been molded to satisfy people's needs. ... God is relevant to contemporary Americans mainly because the sense of God's presence is subjectively comforting; that is, religion solves personal problems rather than addressing broader questions" (As quoted in Pritchard, p. 260). Hybels has caught this wave and presents a sanguine portrayal of God to unchurched Harry that could be summarized, "God loves you and will meet you where you are, forgive you, and meet your felt needs and make you fulfilled" (Pritchard, p. 260). "Marketing savvy demands that the offense of the cross must be downplayed. Salesmanship requires that negative subjects like divine wrath be avoided. Consumer satisfaction means that the standard of righteousness cannot be raised too high. The seeds of a watered-down gospel are thus sown in the very philosophy that drives many ministries today" (*Ashamed of the Gospel*, p. 24).

## Summary

In response to those who object to the new gospel, Strobel counters that "these objections generally relate to the method that's used to communicate the Gospel, not the message itself, and consequently we're free to use our God-given creativity to present Christ's message in new ways that our target audience will connect with" (Strobel, p. 168). This is simply not the case. While some of the methods may disturb us, it is their message that is of real concern. The new paradigm church would loudly proclaim that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But they have redefined salvation. Salvation is not simply, under the new gospel, the forgiveness of sin and the imputation of righteousness. It is not a deliverance from the wrath of God upon a deserving and rebellious people.

The new gospel is a liberation from low [self-esteem](#), a [freedom from emptiness and loneliness](#), a means of fulfillment and excitement, a way to receive your heart's desires, a means of meeting our needs. The old gospel was about God; the new gospel is about us. The old gospel was about sin; the new gospel is about needs. The old gospel was about our need for righteousness; the new gospel is about our need for

fulfillment. The old gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing; the new gospel is attractive. Many are flocking to the new gospel, but it is altogether questionable how many are actually being saved. In a moment of reflection on the validity of the methods used at Willow Creek, Hybels himself asked the audience, "How many of us have been vaccinated with a mild case of Christianity? How many among us have the real disease" (as quoted by Pritchard, p. 316)?

"Nothing in Scripture indicates the church should lure people to Christ by presenting Christianity as an attractive option. ... The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (I Cor. 1:18). There is no way to make it otherwise and be faithful to the message. ... The gospel itself is disagreeable, unattractive, repulsive, and alarming to the world. It exposes sin, condemns pride, convicts the unbelieving heart, and shows human righteousness -- even the best, most appealing aspects of human nature -- to be worthless, defiled, filthy rags (cf. Isa. 64:6)" (*Ashamed of the Gospel*, pp. 72, 111, 128).

Spurgeon warned in his day that, "When the old faith is gone, and enthusiasm for the gospel is extinct, it is no wonder that people seek something else in the way of delight. Lacking bread, they feed on ashes; rejecting the way of the Lord, they run greedily in the path of folly" (As quoted in *Ashamed of the Gospel*, p. 67).

We are forced to ask, as in the thought-provoking video, *In the Name of God*: "As these churches try to attract sell-out crowds are they in danger of selling out the gospel?" Worthy question. Rather than winning the lost for Christ, the truth is closer to Well's assessment, "The church is losing its voice. It should be speaking powerfully to the brokenness of life in this postmodern world, and applying the balm of truth to wounds that are fresh and open, but it is not. It is adrift" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 207).

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\* Portions of this four-part report have been excerpted and/or adapted by BDM from a series of articles by the same names (by Gary Gilley, Pastor, Southern View Chapel, Springfield, IL), that were published in Pastor Gilley's June through September, 2000, *Think on These Things*.