

The "Business Model" of the Church

By Dr. Gary M. Gulan, ©2005

Introduction: The modern church growth movement seeks to retool the church into a "business model."

At first thought, most church people think this is a healthy viewpoint because the church conducts the business by handling money, the function of officers, voting, conducting as a corporation, filing legal papers and conducting monthly business meetings in a better way. However, the modern church growth movement's "business model" incorporates this along with much much more.

George Barna states "it is time for the church to adopt a whole new paradigm for understanding itself, a model borrowed from the contemporary business world. Like it or not, the church is not only in a market but is itself a business. It has a product to sell, relationship to Jesus and other; its core product is the message of salvation, and each local church is a franchise. The church's pastors will be judged not by their teaching and counseling but their ability to run the church smoothly and efficiently as if it were a business. And like any secular business, the church must show a profit, which is to say it must achieve success in penetrating and servicing its market."¹

David Wells writes, "George Barna's strategy for revamping the church involves a combination of the technique of big business and the ethos of the recovery group. He argues that the traditional church must free itself from an addiction to smallness and then avail itself of the same techniques that marketers use to discover what product will most likely to sell in a given area."²

What has driven some churches to adopt the business model for the church?

I would offer you at least four main thoughts.

1. The church is seen in competition with the other religious groups.

David Wells writes, "Barna contends that the church is engaged in a war. Aggressive marketers are vigorously working to place their products in the minds of contemporary consumers. More than that, they want their philosophy to dictate people's appetites and horizons, and they have become highly proficient in accomplishing their goals. It is a war for the marketing niche that modern people are made and shaped, and in this highly competitive environment, the church has lost out."³

2. The church and her ministry is seen as ineffective in a modern world.

George Barna writes that offering to meet people's needs is not a marketing gimmick but a method of ensuring effective ministry.⁴

3. The church is seen as dying out or so small it is not successful.

George Barna's philosophy is that the traditional church must free itself from an addiction to smallness. In order to become a successful megachurch, the church must adopt a business marketing model that meets the consumer's needs.⁵

David Wells writes, "The addition from which relief is being sought, and from which many evangelical pastors are now seeking healing, is smallness. Smallness is presented by the church growth advocates as a frame of mind, a condition resulting from an inability to think beyond the traditional, an inability to make connections with contemporary people, in ability to update routines, music, plans, expectations, and services. Smallness is attributed to hidebound, pinched, and narrow thinking. And it is charged that the traditional church has an addiction to smallness."⁶

4. The church communicates a negative method of personal evangelism.

By making each service an evangelistic outreach that markets its product to the consumer, the pressure for personal evangelism is removed.⁷

What is the outcome of the church as a business model?

I would offer you at least three main thoughts.

1. The church indulges in a constant internal inventory.

David Wells writes, "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 is the market place, to ask ourselves perpetually whether the products we are being offered meet our present felt needs."⁸

2. The church is not loyal to any one item within its theology or ministry.

David Wells writes, "In this sort of environment, market research has found that there is scarcely any consumer loyalty to particular products and brands any more."⁹

3. The church will have large number attending, but will have a constant turn over.

David Wells writes, "The consumer, like the marketer, 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. The pews may be full, but never with the same people from week to week. People keep entering, lured by the church's attractions or just to check out the wares, but then they move on because they feel their needs, real or otherwise, are not being met."¹⁰

What's the problem with the church as a "business model?"

I would offer you at least six insights.

1. The "business model" of the modern church growth program has made the church into a "secular entity or organization" rather than a "living spiritual organism." George Barna argued the church must be revamped. He states that the church must define its services in terms of contemporary needs just as any secular business must.¹¹

2. The church has made "social need" sovereign rather than God.

David Wells asks, "The churches that are allowing themselves to be shaped by the sovereignty of social need invariably wind up being most sensitive to the needs of the baby boomers. But can a body that contours itself in this fashion any longer claim to be the church?"¹²

3. The church has become "worldly"

David Wells, "The contemporary marketing of the church, by contrast, seems to be aggressively committed to a vivid this-worldliness operating under the guise of a dedication to the virtue of meeting people's needs. 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 surrender. It is not merely marketing a product."¹³

David Wells defines worldliness as "That system of values, in any given age, which has at its center our fallen human perspective, which displaces God and His truth from the world, and which makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange."¹⁴

4. The church has become "pragmatic."

Church growth people like George Barna, view the church as a failure because she is small. Any method that helps her to grow and achieve success is worth trying.¹⁵

5. The church begins to adopt "old liberalism."

David Wells writes, "It is not difficult to see how the marketer's evangelism might begin to resemble the old liberalism, the gospel H. Richard Niebuhr once described as consisting in a God without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross."¹⁶

6. The church becomes "man-centered."

George Barna has a strategy that is quite man-centered. His strategy is co-opting God into a needs centered theory.¹⁷

Conclusion: David Wells makes two insightful conclusions concerning the "business model" of the modern church growth movement: (1.) "As in most of the processes of modernity, truth and the transcendent are casualties of this intrusion."¹⁸ (2.) "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. 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 consumer is always right, and this is precisely what the gospel insists cannot be the case."¹⁹

Several points keep running through my mind concerning this area and other areas of the modern church growth movement, (1.) the church cannot offer the world something that the world does better; (2.) The church must offer the world something it cannot attain; (3.) The church must operate in the spiritual realm not in the fallen human realm; and (4.) The success of the church is measured by a spiritual relationship to God and not by numbers of people, especially a mixed multitude that does not honor the Lord.

References:

¹Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth, George Barna, Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988, p. 13-15.

²God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 72.

³God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 72.

⁴User Friendly Churches: What Successful Churches Have In Common And Why Their Ideas Work, Ron Durham, Ventura: Regal, 1991, p. 107.

- ⁵The Frog in the Kettle: What Christians Need To Know About Life In the Year 2000, George Barna, Ventura: Regal, 1990.
- ⁶God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 77.
- ⁷The Habits of Highly Effective Churches, George Barna, Ventura: Regal, 1999, Pp. 114-115.
- ⁸God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 75.
- ⁹God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 75.
- ¹⁰God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 75.
- ¹¹User Friendly Churches: What Successful Churches Have In Common And Why Their Ideas Work, Ron Durham, Ventura: Regal, 1991, p. 107; Cf. God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 74.
- ¹²God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 75.
- ¹³God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 76.
- ¹⁴Losing Our Virtue, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p. 4.
- ¹⁵God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 83.
- ¹⁶God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 82.
- ¹⁷The Power of Vision, George Barna, Ventura: Regal, 1992, p. 28.
- ¹⁸God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 74.
- ¹⁹God in the Waste Land, David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 82.