

Consumer Christianity

by Dave Hunt

Consumer Christianity is a form of Christianity that prioritizes the needs and desires of the individual over the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, leading to spiritual destruction and a lack of biblical discernment.

Scripture: Genesis 3:1, Luke 7:36, Philippians 3:19, 2 Peter 1:3, 1 John 2:16

Topics: "Church Growth", "Biblical Truth"

Description

Dave Hunt addresses the issue of consumer Christianity, which focuses on building the kingdom of God or attracting individuals to Christianity through methods that appeal to the flesh, rather than God's ways. He highlights how consumerism in churches today involves applying business principles and marketing strategies, leading to a shallow understanding of biblical Christianity and spiritual destruction. Hunt emphasizes the dangers of compromising biblical truths for the sake of church growth and warns against the subtle shift towards consumer Christianity that dilutes the gospel message and misleads individuals seeking true salvation.

Transcript

What do I mean by consumer Christianity? Generally, it is any attempt to build the kingdom of God or build up the individual Christian (or attract the potential convert to Christianity) by means and methods that appeal to the flesh, i.e., the deceitful and self-serving heart of man. It had its beginning in the Garden of Eden when Satan manipulated Eve into disobeying God while believing she was enriching herself (Gn 3:1-6).

More specifically related to what's taking place today, consumer Christianity is an endeavor to help Christian churches grow in size and become more effective through the application of business principles, marketing strategies, and management concepts. It characterizes the most popular venture in Christendom today, which should seem rather odd, if not disturbing, to anyone who has an understanding of both "consumerism" and "Christianity." Why? Because these terms are antagonistic to one another.

Consumerism in the business sense is a concept based upon customer satisfaction, which is the key to any successful commercial enterprise. The product or service must be tailored to the wants and perceived needs of the customer, or there is no sustainable profit. The consumer rules, because where there is no customer, there is no profit and, therefore, no business. God rules in biblical Christianity. It is His revelation to humanity regarding "all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (2 Pt 1:3). Simply put, biblical Christianity encompasses all that is necessary for man-kind to know and do in order to be

reconciled to Him, to please Him daily, and to live with Him for all eternity. It is not a business endeavor and, in fact, has no relationship to business or its associated marketing concepts.

Any attempt to enhance the practice of biblical Christianity by means of business principles is, at best, adding futile methodologies to God's Word. At worst, such an attempt rejects the sufficiency of the Scriptures in favor of works of the flesh, quenches the Holy Spirit, and subjects one to the deceptions of, the service of, and in the end, the bondage of the god of this world. In any case, it leads to spiritual destruction in the church and has eternal consequences.

Consumer Christianity is at the heart of the church-growth movement, and its deadly effect is found among all denominations (as well as pseudo-Christian cults). Many evangelical churches have committed themselves wholeheartedly to a marketing approach aimed primarily at attracting the lost, who are viewed as potential customers. As unbelievers attend the church and mix with new and long-standing members, the consumer concept unavoidably spreads to the entire congregation. This inevitably effects the preaching, music, Sunday School programs, etc., which in turn produces a biblical shallowness throughout the congregation.

More often than not, the business approach has been successful in adding numbers to a church. Tens of thousands of pastors across the U.S., and thousands more internationally, have been influenced by high-profile ministries and have put to use their various marketing methodologies for soul-winning and church growth.

Is that the biblical way to win souls and effect growth in the church?

To some biblical Christians the answer is an obvious "No!" But to increasing numbers who also claim to hold to the Bible as their authoritative and all-sufficient source of God's truth, "No" has given way to "Possibly...Perhaps..." or "Let's be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water!" Well, let's strain the water to see if there is indeed a baby to rescue.

Is consumerism supported by the Scriptures? Did God shape His Gospel to gratify the worldly desires of humanity? Are there some things in the Bible that should be strategically avoided in order not to put off "potential" believers? Does God's Word reflect a concern that people might take their "business" elsewhere if their felt needs aren't being met? Does the Bible tell us to make the truth more acceptable by feeding it to the lost in diluted or entertaining forms? And is it really the gospel that saves if it's altered to cater to non-Christians? If any believer even remotely thinks so, I fear that the thinking of the world has grievously influenced his understanding of the Bible.

Certainly, pastors ought to know better, yet in most cases where consumerism has infected a church, they have been instrumental in implementing it. The pastors to whom I am referring here, and am most concerned about, are those who consider themselves to be biblical, who sincerely want to see souls saved, and who honestly want to fulfill their calling and ministry in a way that is pleasing to God. How could such a shepherd of the sheep be drawn into consumer Christianity?

The process often develops subtly. Let's say a pastor loves his church members and wants them to be happy. He also wants them to grow spiritually, and he is always looking for ways for new sheep to be added to his flock. When conflicts arise or growth expectations are not realized, solutions to such problems are often sought from others who have been seemingly successful regarding those issues. The recommended remedies almost always involve some form of accommodation.

For example, a very common church conflict today is that of different tastes in music, which is usually resolved by establishing separate services--one with traditional hymns and one featuring contemporary songs. As that alteration seems to satisfy most members, many pastors are encouraged to add more souls to their church by combining the attraction of contemporary music with seeker-sensitive (appealing and non-threatening) messages presented in a convenient and casual Saturday evening service. Innovative programs are then formulated to sustain the interest of would-be converts and motivate the rarely active church members, with particular emphasis on entertaining activities to attract the youth and keep them coming.

Pastors tell me that they reluctantly glean ideas from the world in order to compete with the world that they might reach the lost in order to save them from the world. They're aware of the irony of that approach but argue that it's the only way to avoid preaching to empty pews. The preaching, by the way, is often shortened and supplemented by visuals, skits, and music productions.

This is a path that, though seemingly harmless at first, leads to the broad road of consumer Christianity. Although we empathize with pastors who feel compelled (some even coerced by church politics) to go down that thoroughfare, it is paved with biblical compromises and headed for a spiritual dead end.

This church-growth enterprise is hardly new to Christianity. It is a chronicle of doing things man's way rather than God's way. Fourth century Emperor Constantine has yet to be equaled in successful strategies for "growing the church." He professed to have become a Christian and induced half of the Roman Empire to do likewise. This era of compromises made by the Emperor (the self-appointed "Vicar of Christ"/"Bishop of bishops") in order to draw in new converts is characterized by Will Durant in *The Story of Civilization* as a time in which "the world converted Christianity."¹ Another historian writes, "Far from being a source of improvement [over the persecution the Christians previously suffered], this [political] alliance was a source of 'greater danger and temptation'....[I]ndiscriminately filling the churches [with pagans]...simply washed away the clear moral landmarks that separated the 'church' from the 'world.'"²

One millennium later, Martin "Luther saw and felt [religious] Rome utterly abandoned to money, luxury, and kindred evils," writes Edwin Booth. "He was stunned and unable to understand it."³ Nevertheless, he and others did something about it. The clarion call of the Reformation was "Sola Scriptura!" and, although "Scripture alone" wasn't followed entirely, God's Word and His way were restored as the authority and rule of life for millions deceived by the devastating compromise that became the Roman Catholic Church.

Consumer Christianity has never been a one-way affair. It takes both a deal maker and a deal taker. Tetzl, the sixteenth-century Dominican monk and the "P.T. Barnum" of the sale of Indulgences, was a master manipulator. Even so, his job was made all the easier by "indulging" the self-serving natures of his Catholic customers. Both rich and poor alike were willing to pay anything to avoid the flames of Hell and Purgatory.

Protestantism has had its own share of both spiritual rip-off artists and consumers ripe for the picking. Whereas Tetzl's "fund raising" was instrumental in building St. Peter's in Rome, the "health and prosperity" evangelists of the twentieth century (many still going strong today) helped build Trinity Broadcasting Network into the largest religious television network in the world. By distorting and turning the biblical doctrine of faith into a power anyone can use to obtain wealth and healing, these con men and women have personally amassed fortunes at the expense of the biblically feeble and illiterate, as well as from those "...whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things" (Phil

3:19).

During the last fifty years, those most susceptible to the schemes of religious charlatans were professing Christians who had an affinity for spiritual experiences rather than sound doctrine. They were usually found among the Pentecostals and Charismatics. Most thoughtful, doctrine-conscious Christians seemed to be immune to the "seed faith" come-ons of an Oral Roberts or the blasphemous "Holy Spirit" power displays of a Benny Hinn, two leaders among a host of other "signs and wonders" promoters.

However, spiritual gullibility has found fertile soil--or, more pointedly, a widening swamp--among those who traditionally have fostered biblical discernment. Although the seductive methodologies are slightly different, the basis for an effective spiritual deception is the same: no Christians, evangelical or otherwise, are impervious to "...all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life..." (1 Jn 2:16). Furthermore, the only safeguard against such deception--the reading of and obedience to the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit--is being systematically diluted throughout the evangelical church.

Church history has demonstrated the necessity of adhering to God's Word; when that takes place, holiness and fruitfulness follow. When biblical Christianity is adulterated (by adding the methods of men) or abandoned altogether, man's religious distortions prevail, leading the professing church into spiritual anemia and blindness: "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prv 14:12). There is also a correlation between the depth of a church's reliance upon the Scriptures and its acceptance of heretical beliefs and practices. As a church reaches a shallow state with regard to biblical understanding, the ability of its members to discern false teaching becomes practically impossible.

Consumer Christianity's most deadly effect is what it does to the presentation of the gospel of salvation, the only hope a person has to be reconciled to God. It is nearly always a subtle sales pitch featuring all the wonderful things God has for mankind: He loves them so much and desires to have them spend eternity with Him, and they are significant and of infinite worth. This then becomes the reason for Christ's sacrifice on the cross. That mixture of truths and self-indulging distortions is followed by a brief "sinner's prayer" being repeated by those who were persuaded by the enticing offer. This method has become so commonplace that it's difficult for some Christians to recognize any problem, let alone realize how misleading it is with regard to a person truly being saved.

How so? Let's start with someone who is genuinely saved and work backwards. Everyone who is born again by the Spirit of God has a new heart, one filled with God's love, for Him and for others, as well as for His teachings. He or she is a new creation, and although not perfect in these things, there resides within that person a heart that desires to please God rather than self.

One explicit example of this is found in Luke 7:36-50, involving the woman of sinful reputation who entered the home of Simon the Pharisee, where Jesus was invited to dine. She washed His feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and kissed them repeatedly. Jesus declared of her that she loved much because she was forgiven much.

These passages teach how essential conviction of sin is in coming to Christ. The self-righteous and self-serving Pharisee had little or no conviction of sin and therefore sought no forgiveness. The woman, on the other hand, gave no thought to herself or the disdain with which she was regarded by the dinner guests. Her thankfulness that Jesus would and did cleanse her of her sins compelled her to die to self and

live for Him.

The gospel according to consumer Christianity, on the other hand, must make its appeal to self, emphasizing things (both true and distorted) that meet the felt needs of the lost. This seriously restricts all but a hint of any biblical doctrines that would bring about conviction of sin. What's the problem? Jesus came to save sinners, not consumers.

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