

# Programs, Programs, Get Your Programs

## Exposing the Flaws of a Fad-Driven Church

*Excerpted and abridged from an article by Phil Johnson*

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The evangelical movement right now, at the beginning of the 21st century, is in a spiritual condition not very much different from the medieval church just before the Protestant Reformation. Think about it, Luther had to deal with Tetzels, the charlatan fund-raiser who went through Europe promising people miracles in return for money so that the Pope could build St. Peter's church in the Vatican. We've got at least a dozen Tetzels appearing daily on TBN, promising people miracles in exchange for money so that Jan Crouch can make the sets of their television studios gaudier than any room in the Vatican while she adds enough pin hair extensions to rival the Dome of St. Peter's. The medieval church was overrun with superstitions and ignorance. We've got people reciting the prayer of Jabez every day who are convinced that it's a magic formula that will bring them wealth and good luck. The medieval church had Leo X and Machiavelli. We've got Bill Gothard and Garry Ezzo. The medieval church saw a decline in doctrine and morality in the church and a corresponding increase in corruption, scandal and man-centered worship. All that is true today. Worst of all, in the medieval era, the gospel was in eclipse and people were so woefully ignorant of biblical truth that men in Martin Luther's time could complete seminary and enter ministry without even having learned "the first principles of the oracles of God." We're well on the road to that same situation today. Many seminaries are deliberately eliminating biblical and theological courses and replacing them with courses in business and marketing. And church leaders are actually encouraging these trends...

Pastors these days are carefully indoctrinated with the notion that they must regard their people as consumers. Religion is carefully packaged to appeal to the consumers' demands. There are marketing agencies that offer seminars for church leaders to teach them how to "brand" their churches to appeal to the most people. Most church leaders these days are therefore obsessed with opinion polls, public relations, salesmanship, merchandizing, and customer satisfaction. They have been taught and encouraged to think that way by virtually every popular program of the past two decades. In 1988 (seventeen years ago now), George Barna wrote a book titled *Marketing the Church*. It was published by Navpress, at the time a major mainstream evangelical publisher (a lot less mainstream these days). In that book, George Barna wrote: "The audience, not the message, is sovereign." That was the basic idea. And it's a notion that thousands of pastors and church leaders have uncritically imbibed and it has been parroted in virtually every major book on church leadership up through and including *The Purpose Driven Church*. The audience is sovereign. Their "felt needs" should shape the preachers' message. Opinion polls and listener response become barometers that tell the preacher what to preach. That's what Barna was calling for way back in 1988.

He wrote: "If [we are] going to stop people in the midst of hectic schedules and cause them to think about what we're saying, *our message* (note this word - message) *has to be adapted to the needs of the audience*. When we produce advertising that is based on the take it or leave it proposition, rather on sensitivity and response to peoples needs, people will invariably reject our message."

Compare that with the words of the apostle Paul, who (in 2 Tim. 4:2-5) said, "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires (felt needs?), because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables." What was Paul's point? Do you think he would have agreed with Barna, who said we *must* adapt our message to the preferences of the audience, or risk having them rejects the message? No, Paul told Timothy: "But you... fulfill your ministry." "Preach the word! . . . in season and out of season CONVINCe, REBUKE, EXHORT, with all longsuffering ("stay at it") and TEACHING", (not give them your story). That is what we are called to do as pastors- not follow the fads and fashions of our culture Not even to follow the silly parade of evangelical fads that has assaulted the church in wave after wave for two decades running. The fads and the programs are killing the evangelical movement. And I'm convinced that those who do not get back to the business of preaching the Bible will soon see their churches die - because, after all, the Word of God is the only message that has the power to give spiritual life...

Think about it; in the late 1970's, when Jimmy Carter became president and the secular media discovered the expression "born again", the average person in the mainstream American culture didn't even know what an "evangelical" was. But evangelicalism has ballooned so much... in visibility and political savvy that... *Time* magazine did a feature Photo-essay and cover article "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals In America." Here's why I don't think that's a particularly encouraging development: I read their list of 25 influential evangelicals. That article by itself would have been enough to convince me the evangelical movement is in serious trouble. The list included people like T.D. Jakes, who denies the Trinity; former Lutheran-turned Catholic priest Richard John Neuhaus; Joyce Meyer, the jet-setting prosperity-gospel preacherette, and Brian McLaren the postmodern pastor who denies the authority of Scripture and wants to see the church make a radical break with just about everything that's rooted in historic Christianity. Thirty years ago, not one of those people would have been include in a list of "evangelicals." They are not evangelicals in historic sense of the word. What's changed? It's not that more people became evangelicals, but that the concept of evangelical has lost its historic meaning. These days it means everything - and it therefore means nothing. It's clear where *Time* magazine thinks evangelicalism's clout is being felt the most. It's not in spiritual matters, but in the realm of politics and culture. And you know what? They are right. The word evangelical used to describe a well-defined theological and biblical position. What made evangelicals distinct was their commitment to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture and the exclusivity of Christ. Now evangelicalism is a political movement, and its representatives hold a wide variety of theological beliefs, Neuhaus's Roman Catholicism

(with the full complement of the mass and the saints) to Jakes heretical Sabellianism (Jesus Only) to Joyce Meyers [Hagin, Copeland] brand of Word-Faith teaching, to McLaren's anti-scriptural postmodernism. There is only one person in possibly the entire list who could qualify as an evangelical theologian, and that's J.I. Packer. But Packer himself has been on a quest for the past 20 years to make evangelicalism as broad as possible. Note his stubborn promotion of ECT "Catholics and Evangelicals Together" authored by Neuhaus and Charles Colson]. Frankly, none of these people I just named would even agree among themselves on any distinctive points of the gospel message. The one thing they do agree on is that they'd like to see the evangelical movement become as broad and inclusive as possible. But that's not historic evangelicalism, is it? That kind of latitudinarianism has always belonged to Socinians and Deists (look them up) and modernists and theological liberals... There's another common trait shared by many of the people on the *Time* list. For the most part, they are fad makers. These are people who have designed the programs that are peddled by the out-of-control [largely Japanese owned] Christian publishing industry and purchased and implemented with little critical thought or concern by hundreds of thousands of people in the evangelical movement. Rick Warren heads the list and is the father of the hottest prefabricated program of the moment, "Forty Days of Purpose." Tim LaHaye is co-author of the bestselling fad of all time - the "Left Behind" series... Bill Hybels masterminded [based on Robert Schuller] the "seeker-sensitive" fad. McLaren took that to the next level with the "emergent church" fad. And James Dobson is the godfather of the "culture war" fad. (Too bad for Bruce Wilkinson that *Time* didn't do this piece two years earlier when the "Jabez" was still hot...

Now I have labeled all these trends and programs as "fads", because that is what they all are. They are popular for the moment ... [but] not one of these movements or programs even existed 35 years ago. Most of them would not even have been dreamed of by evangelicals a generation ago. And, frankly, most of them will not last another generation. They will all eventually fade and die [quick death], just like the Jabez phenomena. And some poor publisher or wholesale distributor will be left with warehouses full of Jabez stuff; Weigh-Down Workshop paraphernalia, "What would Jesus Do?" bracelets and Purpose Driven merchandise (complete with the authorized trademark symbol)... But that is how fads are crafted. They are deliberately dumbed down, made soft and generic and non-threatening, so that they don't rebuke anyone's sin; they don't endanger anyone's shallowness; they don't threaten anyone's comfort zone; and they don't challenge anyone's worldliness. That's the way both publishers and the people want it. That is the culture of the evangelical movement deliberately created when it bought the notion that religion is something to sell to consumers like a commodity. It created a movement where unspiritual and unscrupulous men could easily make merchandise of the gospel. It conditioned people to be like "children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting." That's Ephesians 4:14, and it's a perfect biblical description of the faddism that has overtaken the evangelical movement in recent years

The evangelical movement is filled with people who have been trained and conditioned and encouraged to respond to every wind that blows, Rick Warren thinks it's a good thing, and he compares it to surfing. You just ride wave after wave, and that, he says, is

the means God uses to bring about church growth... Ah! So that's why we have this proliferation of fads. Evangelicals have gotten so skilled at surfing the latest fads and fashions that God sends more and more of them? And they get bigger every time... The next fad is already here. It's the "Emergent Church" movement - seeker-sensitivity gone to seed. It's Saddleback for postmoderns - Willow Creek to the tenth power, for the pierced and tattooed generation. The most influential people in the Emergent Church movement are people who have consciously and deliberately abandoned the authority of Scripture. Like all good postmodernists, Emergent Christians hate clarity and precision... Postmodern people don't trust authority figures. They don't want to hear someone stand up and expound the Word of God... The fad-driven church cannot be governed by the Word of God. If you get your direction by seeing which way the winds of change are blowing... The way the wind is blowing these days is not good. The doctrine of justification by faith is under attack on several fronts... A well-known young British evangelical media figure - a man named Steve Chalke, attacks the doctrine of original sin... He denounces the principle of substitutionary atonement... He insists God would never punish His Son for other people's offenses. In his book [The Lost Message of Jesus] he states: "How have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger...?" I will tell you how I came to believe that: because the Bible says so (Isaiah 53:10). "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. [He made] His soul an offering for sin." The problem is, in the contemporary, fad-driven evangelical culture, almost no one is left who is both equipped and willing to answer a view like that. Someone decided several years ago that the biblical *word propitiation* is too technical and not user-friendly enough for contemporary Christians, so preachers stopped explaining it. Now that this idea is under attack we have a generation of leaders who don't remember what it meant or why it's important to defend. And the overwhelming majority of British evangelicals have rushed to Steve Chalke's defense, claiming his critics [there are a few] are just overweening negativists who are behind the times and out of touch with the postmodern era. The Evangelical Alliance in England is busy wringing their hands about the "tone" of the debate and the "unity" of the movement - and frankly if things follow historical pattern, ultimately very little will be done to stem the tide of heresy this book has already engendered. There are frankly already lots of American evangelicals who are eager to challenge the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. This has been one of the main items on the Open Theists' agenda for several years.

Something seriously needs to change in order to rescue the idea of historic evangelicalism from the contemporary evangelical movement ... A generation of preachers needs to rise up and be committed to preaching the Word, in season and out of season, and be willing to ignore the waves of silly fads that come and go and leave the church's head spinning. Scripture is better than any fad. Preaching the Word of God is more effective than any new methodology church experts have ever invented.... The nature of God's Word guarantees that.

**The Word of God is Powerful**

Hebrew 4:12 says: "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword piercing even to the division of soul and spirit and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." NKJV... The Word of God is living... It speaks of vitality, life, energy. The Word of God has a life force that is unlike any merely human book... It has power to impart life to those who are spiritually dead... Every page of the Bible has a life-changing power that is just as fresh as the day it was written. We don't have to make it come alive; it is both alive and active. The Word of God always works effectually. It always accomplishes its intended purpose. In Isaiah 55:11, God says my word will be that goes forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing where to I sent it." Sometimes God's purpose is rebuke and correction; sometimes it is instruction and edification. Sometimes it is blessing; sometimes it is judgment. The gospel is "the savor of death unto death" for some, for others it is "the savor of life unto life." Either way, the Word of God is effectual, productive, and powerful. It always produces the effect God intends... Our task simple: all we have to do is make the Bible's meaning plain, proclaim it with accuracy and clarity. And the Spirit of God uses His Word to transform lives. The power is in the Word, not in any technique or program.

### **The Word of God is Penetrating**

"The word of God is like a sword - "a two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and the joints and marrow." The Word of God has no blunt side. It cuts no matter which way you swing it. Not only that, but it also has a penetrating point. It is "piercing." You can swing it like saber or thrust with it like a rapier. You don't have to be highly skilled to use it with effect. In the hands of an amateur it will still work. There is a story in the biography of George Whitfield about a man named Thorpe. Thorpe and his friends conspired together to mock and oppose Whitfield. Whitfield had severely crossed eyes... Thorpe got one of Whitfield's published sermons and took it to the local pub... Thorpe was pretty good at doing impressions and he had Whitfield's mannerisms and gestures down pat. So he stood in the center of the pub, crossed his eyes and began to deliver a derisive rendition of Whitfield's sermon. But in the middle of the sermon, the Word of God pierced his heart, and he suddenly stopped and sat down, trembling and broken-hearted. Right then and there, he confessed the truth of the gospel and gave his heart to Christ... Notice that the Word of God pierces even to "the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is the discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." ... But how can that be? You ask. How can surgery be done with a sword? Well, that brings us to the third characteristic of God's Word...

### **The Word of God is Precise.**

The Word of God divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow and it is capable of great discrimination... Some people misread the phrase "the dividing asunder of soul and spirit

and imagine that this describes two completely separate parts of the immaterial makeup of our beings. I don't believe that's what it is teaching. I realize there are good Bible teachers who teach that man is a tripartite creature. But I don't think that's the point here. Scripture often uses the expressions "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably. It is difficult to make any meaningful distinction ... and that is the whole point. Just like the "joints" and "marrow" of your bones and the "thoughts and intentions" of your heart, these things are so inextricably linked that it's impossible to separate them without destroying one or the other. They aren't distinct human faculties. There is overlap and interdependence. But the Word of God is precise and exact, and it cuts with painstaking accuracy. It divides what cannot otherwise be divided. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, and yet more precise than any surgeon's scalpel...

We ought to make better use of the Word of God in ministry, and ignore all the evangelical fads that come and go. After all, only the Word of God has the powerful, penetrating precision that is necessary to reach and revitalize hearts that are cold and dead because of sin. And this is also our clear biblical mandate: "Preach the word... in season and out of season" - no matter which way the winds of doctrine are blowing and no matter how many fads and fashions come and go. Obey that mandate, and God will bless your ministry. Chase every bandwagon that comes down the road, and you will regret it on that day when you give account for your ministry.

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