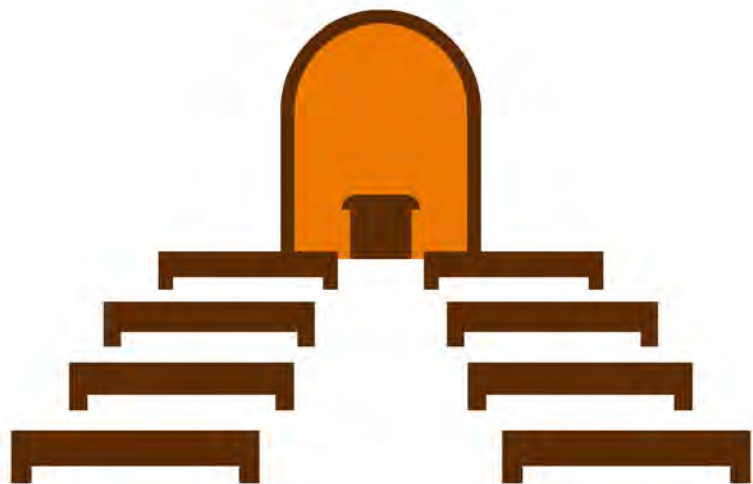


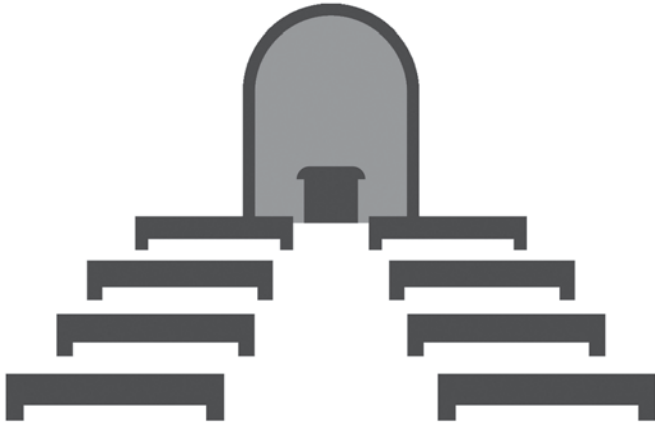
GARY MILLER

CHURCH MATTERS



God's original purpose for
the church and why it matters

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the church and why it matters

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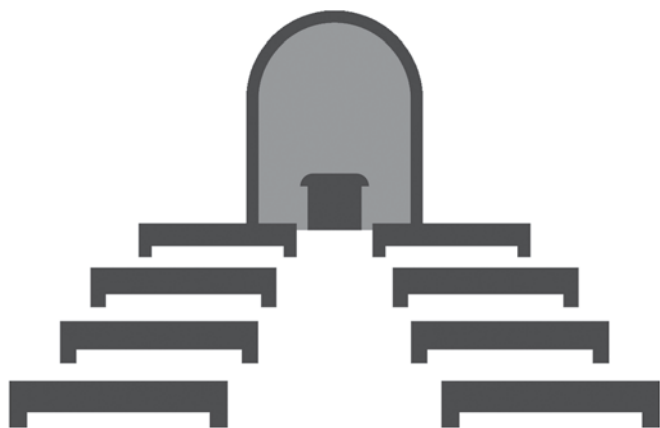


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Where there is no vision,
the people perish.

Proverbs 29:18

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PART ONE

The PURPOSE of Church

Modern Evangelical Christianity

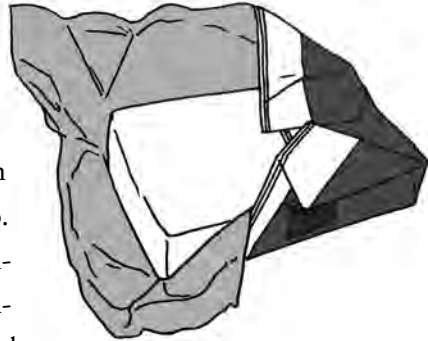
In the late 1940s, just after World War II, manufacturers of margarine in the United States had a problem. Their product was good, but sales were poor. Since the arrival of imitation butter from France in the 1870s, outraged American dairy farmers had protested its promotion. Pressure was placed on legislators, and laws were enacted which made its sale difficult in some states and illegal in others.

Margarine, its enemies said, was a direct threat to the family farm and the American way of life. Lobbyists funded anti-margarine activists, who spread cartoons of factories producing margarine in huge vats and dropping in stray cats, arsenic, and rubber boots. Some spread rumors that the mix of chemicals in margarine caused cancer. Others said eating it could lead to insanity. By 1902, over half the states in America had enacted laws requiring the product to be a color other than yellow. A few even demanded that it be dyed pink in order to be sold in their state.¹ However, over time these laws were repealed, the fears behind them faded, and margarine was allowed on grocery store shelves.

The product now tasted almost like butter, looked like butter, was cheaper than butter, and was said to be healthier than butter. But it still did not sell. In desperation, manufacturers turned to a man with an uncanny ability to market hard-to-sell products.

Louis Cheskin had spent his life observing people and determining why they purchased the products they did. He investigated how packaging affected people's perception of value and quality. One of Cheskin's most notable discoveries was that people are apparently unable to resist transferring their feelings about the packaging to the product itself. He did many studies in which he asked participants to compare several products, the only variable being the box or wrapper. He discovered that consumers gave entirely different answers about taste and quality when the packaging was changed.

Cheskin took Marlboro cigarettes, originally designed for women and selling poorly, repackaged and advertised them using a rugged Western theme,² and sales began to climb. He accomplished similar turnarounds for Betty Crocker products and Tide soap. What could he do with margarine?



Through numerous studies, Cheskin determined that perception was the problem, not taste; people still saw margarine as an inferior product. So he told the manufacturer to make two simple alterations: change the wrapper and give it a more sophisticated name. So they wrapped the margarine in foil, a symbol of quality at the time, and changed the name to Imperial.³ The results were astounding! Within a few years, margarine was a strong contender in America as a spread for bread.

A little creativity in marketing can achieve astonishing things. Louis Cheskin was a master at finding consumers' core longings

and convincing them that the product he was marketing would fulfill their desires. He understood the power of repackaging products that are difficult to sell.

Selling Christianity

If there were a list of things whose attributes render them difficult to market, the original Gospel of Jesus Christ would have to be near the top. Imagine trying to sell something that promises to cause conflict in your family,^a appears foolish to your peers,^b garners hate from society,^c and guarantees suffering and persecution to those who pursue it.^d How would you like to market a product like that? Yet the early apostles went into a heathen world promising this very thing. All but one of them experienced exactly what had been promised—persecution, torture, and a martyr’s death. This was the message of Jesus and the early church.

The world doesn’t like this kind of message. It appeared foolish to many when first presented by the apostles, and it is no more favored now. Jesus’ self-denying message will never be popular with a self-absorbed public. How then have evangelists been able to attract people and expand their churches? The answer is both simple and sobering: they have repackaged Christianity. In fact, in their eagerness to pursue potential converts, many modern churches have marketed Christianity using methods straight from the playbook of Louis Cheskin: find the consumers’ deepest longings, then package your product in a way that persuades them it will fulfill their desires.

“Jesus’ self-denying message will never be popular with a self-absorbed public.”

^a Matthew 10:36

^b 1 Corinthians 1:18

^c Mark 13:13, Luke 21:17, John 15:18

^d 2 Timothy 3:12

Attractive Packaging

As you consider Western society, what would you say the general public longs for? One of your first observations will be the fervent pursuit of entertainment. Boredom is not an option. People go to great lengths to find distractions and keep themselves amused. Whether following sports teams, purchasing the newest music, or discussing the latest movie, Americans are passionate about entertainment. Consequently, many churches have incorporated entertainment into their marketing strategy. Good music, expensive stage lighting, funny stories, youth programs, and audio-visual performances are designed to satisfy the seeker's thirst for fun. It isn't easy to compete with Hollywood, but churches are doing their best.

Financial wealth is another obvious craving. Once again, churches are so focused on this topic that they have wrapped "Christianity" in a package that has become known as the health and wealth gospel. Other seekers are pursuing better relationships with friends, family, and spouses. In response, pastors and writers focus their sermons, books, and seminars on the feelings and needs of the people they are trying to attract. Some churches even focus on particular themes. Are you attracted to the Wild West? You can find a church for cowboy culture that speaks of heaven as "that great roundup in the sky." Christianity is being served up any way you like it. As a seeker, you are in the driver's seat, and like the Burger King advertisement, you can "have it your way!" The church is straying from the Gospel to provide a product that pleases. As Rick Warren, an evangelical author and church-growth expert, wrote in *How to Preach Like Jesus*, "Effective salesmen know you always start with the customer, not the product."⁴

If you want to expand your church, we are told, find out what the seeker wants, then market Christianity as an answer to the seeker's "felt need." But should the desires of lost humanity be the center of Christianity? Is this seeker-friendly theology actually Biblical? How did Jesus present His Gospel?

Removing the Wrapper

Jesus clearly had a deep concern for people and their physical needs. He consistently showed compassion and concern for the “felt needs” of humanity. However, He made no attempt to soften truth or sugar-coat His message to please his listeners. When calling men to His kingdom, He started with the hard facts up front. “Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.”^e is not a crowd-pleasing theme. It doesn’t sound very seeker-friendly. But Jesus didn’t come to please men; He came to do the will of His Father.^f

When you make the seeker the center of Christianity, you are promoting something entirely different from Christ’s message. Following Jesus is the answer to our troubled relationships, the cure for our obsession with wealth, and the ultimate source of eternal joy, but we have no promise that our earthly life will be more pleasurable when we choose to follow Him. Jesus and the early church taught the exact opposite. When people claiming to follow Jesus become seeker-centric instead of God-centric, they are promoting something the apostles would not have recognized.

The true Gospel has never been a comfortable message for the unconverted. It calls for drastic change, and many of us have been blessed to grow up in church settings that understand this. I grew up in a church where ministers taught against the fallacy of modern evangelical^g Christianity. I was taught to “remove the wrapper” and look closer at what Jesus actually taught. Repeatedly I heard that many who call themselves Christians will be surprised at the judgment, and that just saying you believe in Jesus is not enough. I was confident that most churchgoers were only talking about Jesus, and I was thankful to be part of a church that was actually following

^e Luke 14:33

^f John 4:34, 8:29

^g When referring to modern evangelical Christians throughout this book, I am referring to nominal modern Protestant Christianity.

Him. After all, we took Jesus' commands literally. Jesus had said we should wash each other's feet and love our enemies, and we believed that was exactly what He meant. Others made excuses, but we really did it. I liked that.

But there was one aspect I had not considered. Many of the modern churches I despised were actually imitating Jesus in one very important way that we were neglecting. They were burdened about the plight of the poor and the spiritual welfare of the lost.

At Least They Care About the Lost!

As I grew older and my exposure expanded, this began to trouble me. I read accounts of the Gospel spreading in restricted countries, people hearing about Jesus for the first time, and new first-generation churches springing up. God was obviously at work. Then it would hit me: these "modern evangelical Christians" were doing all this. How could this be?

I remember visiting a soup kitchen in the slums of a large American city. It was an old building full of dirty, dangerous, dysfunctional people. Occasional fights broke out, but around the edges of the room were people who were sick of sin and searching for something different. Ministering to them were dedicated, but doctrinally incorrect, Christians.

Once again I came face to face with an unsettling reality. These "modern evangelical Christians" were the ones venturing into this hazardous setting, dipping up soup, and listening to stories. Some of them may have been divorced and remarried. I knew I wouldn't agree with their position on serving in the military, and there were probably other basic teachings of Jesus they ignored. But one thing troubled me: they might not be correct on every doctrine, but they cared about the lost and downtrodden! They were not just talking about reaching out to people; they were out in the trenches, redemptively working with the strugglers society normally avoids.

Many of us who have grown up in conservative Anabaptist

churches have wrestled with similar questions. We are able to give a Scriptural answer for every conceivable question. Yet when we stand back and compare our local churches with those first believers in the book of Acts, something is often missing. Too many of us lack the vibrancy, passion, and power they possessed. Unlike those early believers, we struggle to get neighbors to visit our churches, and we seem incapable of impacting surrounding society as they did.

“Is it possible that we have all the right answers, but are asking the wrong questions?”

While the churches in Acts were known for turning the world upside down, we have difficulty at times just holding our churches together. What is wrong? Is it possible that we have all the right answers, but are asking the wrong questions?

We talk about how churches should operate, which procedures are best, and even argue about independent churches versus conferences or fellowships. But too often we forget to investigate deeper. In this book we want to take a fresh look at the church. Why did God instigate the church in the first place? What did He have in mind? And now, centuries later, is it possible that we are on the wrong track?