



The Promise and Peril of Marketing Worship

Workshop by Rev. Caleb Bassett
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Workshop Summary

Because of its publicity and frequency, the Sunday service is often advertised, marketed, or otherwise promoted in much the same way that a local business might promote its own offerings. But making worship marketable can lead to unintended and unwanted consequences ranging from bad marketing to poor practice. Nevertheless, it is possible to make known what takes place on Sunday with taste and integrity—but to do so requires leaders to set aside conventional marketing wisdom. This presentation will equip participants with an updated understanding of contemporary cultural trends and will provide a practical toolkit to help congregations get the word out about worship while preserving the power of what God does for his people in the Sunday service.

ABOUT THE PRESENTER

Rev. Caleb Bassett serves at Our Redeemer, Madison, Wis. Previously he served north of San Diego, Calif. He was a member of the executive committee of the WELS Hymnal Project and chairman of the project's technology subcommittee. He has been a frequent guest panelist on The White Horse Inn, a nationally syndicated radio program and podcast on theology and culture. He is a fellow of the International Academy of Apologetics, Evangelism, and Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, and a member of the WELS Institute for Lutheran Apologetics.

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ABOUT THE HANDOUT

This handout is designed to be a meaningful artifact of the presentation. While participants will be encouraged to use the document for some of the workshop interaction, taking notes is not strictly necessary as the main points of the presentation are reproduced throughout.

Access a PDF copy of this presentation via Dropbox using the QR code provided below.



✓ The Promise

Marketing is the process of promoting and selling products or services, which includes researching, advertising, and delivering them to consumers. It's about understanding what people want and using creative ways to show them how a product or service can meet their needs.

- 1 Consider the definition of marketing above. Take three minutes to yourself and make a list of what seem to be the most common or compelling promises behind the effort to market worship. Compare your list with the people around you.

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- 2 Participants may volunteer to share a promise from their list above for discussion with the rest of the group.

- 3 Note a summary of the **promise** of marketing worship.

Marketing of worship can promote a real sense that a church considers worship as the central activity of the week and that such activity is worth the effort of getting the word out about it.

! The Peril

Marketing is the process of promoting and selling products or services, which includes researching, advertising, and delivering them to consumers. It's about understanding what people want and using creative ways to show them how a product or service can meet their needs.

- ③ Reconsider the definition of marketing above. Take three minutes to yourself and make a list of what seem to be the most relevant or concerning perils behind the effort to market worship. Compare your list with the people around you.

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- ④ Participants may volunteer to share a peril from their list above for discussion with the rest of the group.

- ☰ Note a summary of the **peril** of marketing worship.

Marketing of worship can pursue outdated or false premises while further degrading the reputation of the church by taking what is important and making it appear trivial.

§ The Market Economy

The dominant economic paradigm in our country is the market. The market model imposes—often imperceptibly—a range of questionable assumptions about human nature. In particular the concept of personhood is diminished and with it the strength of communities.

How does the market model do this?

1. **The mythology of a market society makes getting the mark of a substantial person** → *When this mythology rules any activity that is in the form of a gift appears grotesque at worst and trivial at best.*
2. **The mythology of a market society promotes the idea of the self-made person** → *When this mythology rules the incentives are aimed at self-gratification rather than suffering change by external standards.*
3. **The mythology of a market society distorts the role of religious doctrine and practice** → *When this mythology rules spiritual systems will focus on therapeutic aversion to pain more than fruits of faith.*

In many cases the most common ministry fashions in American churches are explicable when seen as the natural byproduct of the world's foremost consumer culture seeking to develop the world's premier consumer churches.

- ✘ The market economy, while undeniably effective at generating phenomenal wealth and prosperity, cannot be uncritically adopted as a healthy paradigm for communicating the work of the church, especially the uniquely vital role of worship centered on the gift of the means of grace.

✿ The Gift Economy

Another cultural form of human economy is the gift economy. In the gift economy goods are exchanged—but not in terms of a market barter—in such a way that increase comes not by consumption but by movement.

What are the marks of a gift economy?

1. **Gifts establish genuine and powerful bonds between people where sale of commodities does not** → *It is foreign to feel a connection to the clerk behind the counter at Costco. Indeed, we do not want to feel burdened by such a human connection when all we want is to buy what we need.*
 2. **Gifts establish deep and resilient communities where the sale of commodities dissolves them** → *The mutual goodwill of gift exchange maintains a kind of relational momentum and equilibrium. On the other hand, when a community becomes only a source of economic productivity it is easily and often dissolved.*
 3. **Gifts constitute overtures of peace and unity where the sale of commodities tends to be only for mutual interest** → *Throughout history the exchange of gifts marked peaceful desires. Even in the case of war, the giving of gifts (or rebuilding of a conquered nation, in modern terms) signaled not just the end of hostilities but the pledge to restore the lost harmony.*
- ☐ *To experience the difference between the market economy and the gift economy, examine your intuitive reaction to the following scenarios.*
- *A parent charges children a fee to open Christmas presents.*
 - *A son purchases an heirloom from a father on his deathbed.*
 - *A star athlete from your favorite team signs a contract with another team.*
- ☑ **The gift economy offers a real and intuitive alternate conception of what is going on in many corners of human activity—especially in the church. It seems to be no coincidence that the Bible talks so much of God’s giving. If churches want to move the needle in terms of contemporary ministry it may be time to think less in terms of the market and more in terms of the gift.**

☰ An Alternative Approach

It may be possible to set aside the assumptions of market logic and pursue instead an approach to communication that is less about selling and more about saying—and saying in a way that opens up opportunities to give.

What are some ways to really say something?

1. **Resist the urge to be derivative** → *There is a commonplace urge in contemporary Christianity to produce material that mimics popular culture, but this only communicates desperation. Consider instead ways to pursue forms less dominated by popular culture.*
 2. **Pursue strategic silence** → *Author and commentator Walker Percy once noted that in an age in which everyone is working so tirelessly to get attention the act of silence is itself a powerful call to come and see. Consider ways that a church can recalibrate the signal to noise ratio.*
 3. **Connect communication to content** → *One backwards incentive in some marketing is to generate attention apart from the actual product. In contemporary mainstream Christianity this often takes the form of therapeutic language. Consider instead more direct ways to explain what will be said and done in worship.*
- ☒ By critically examining the underlying assumptions of market thinking congregations can pursue more interesting and more meaningful ways to communicate their most public-facing ministry of worship. Instead of pitching, churches can proclaim.

☑ **The Matthew 5 Model**

A model worth considering is patterned after the rhetorical style Jesus used numerous times in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard it said, but I say to you.”

1. **Cultivate Cultural Awareness**

Work to develop the capacity to notice more than popular culture and to analyze what you see and hear more objectively. One way to do this is to practice restating in literal terms what a commercial or advertisement is communicating, e.g. “You will finally be happy if you buy this car.”

Of particular value is MissionInsite, a tool available to many congregations through a synodical partnership. MissionInsite will give data about commonly-held religious attitudes and beliefs in your area.

In the same way, do not neglect the examination of assumptions that develop within the church that need correction and reform.

2. **Connect the Dots**

With a solid understanding of ambient attitudes in mind it becomes possible to look ahead at the lectionary and note ways that the upcoming biblical testimony speaks a necessary counterpoint to the cultural trends of our time.

3. **Craft Careful Communication**

In text, work to maintain clarity and brevity. Consider adopting the methodology for “concrete abstracts” noted below. In imagery, pursue simplicity and consistency. Consider adopting a set of rules or standards for imagery in worship promotional materials.

It is usually the case that limitations do not hinder creativity and clarity but actually enhance these things.

- ☒ In this approach the cultural awareness is what “you have heard it said” and the liturgical content is what “I say to you.” By working to connect these two things a congregation will position its proclamation in worship as meaningful communication instead of needless attention-seeking.

✍ **Concrete Abstracts**

Writing clear yet concise summaries (often called abstracts in academic circles) is a skill worth developing. Follow the simple template below to make your summaries less verbose and more meaningful. This method prescribes writing no more than four sentences.

- ① The first sentence is a succinct articulation of an assumption the theme or text addresses or upends.
- ② The second sentence provides brief context for the claim of the first sentence.
- ③ The third sentence is the startling sentence that states the countercultural insight the gospel offers.
- ④ The fourth sentence summarizes how the theme or text at the center of the service delivers the goods to God's people

EXAMPLES

① The common assumption among the religious and non-religious alike is that being a believer is all about keeping your nose clean. ② But what if the real problem is what's within? ③ That turns our understanding upside-down and leaves us in need of ④ a particular person who can deal with our problem—a person named Jesus.

① Skeptics usually write off the miracles of Jesus as nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of his followers. ② In the case of Christ's act of raising the dead to life the explanation is usually that the person raised wasn't really dead. ③ The truth is that Jesus spoke of the dead as if they were just asleep because he knew that for all those whom Christ will raise death is only temporary. ④ This was true of Jairus' daughter, and the same is true of us.

① When we're ashamed at our failure the natural human reaction is to hide. ② Indeed, this was the very first reaction to sin. ③ But the way of Christ is not obscurity but honor. ④ In Jesus we are credited with all the honor of work well done—which means we're free to hold our heads high as we pursue our callings in life.

- ✪ With practice this template can be remixed and used in a variety of different ways. The key is to first define a template and then to use it consistently throughout.