



## **Church in the marketplace**

**True discipleship versus consumer attitudes?**

**By John Benton**

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## **Introduction: The marketplace and the disciple**

Perhaps the most widely held and influential picture of the modern world is that of a marketplace. Society generally is seen in terms of market forces, of supply and demand. There is a continual competition for our attention, money and commitment as various organisations size up current consumer preferences.

It is a deeply commercial world. The whole of consumer society is predicated upon marketplace ideas. Shops have their sales. The internet has its offers. The workplace thinks in terms of a 'jobs market'. The name of the game is competition in the context of personal choice – getting the best deal for yourself.

### **Two ways to live**

But though we are massively influenced, as I will later suggest, by the marketplace, Christians are actually called to see things from a radically different perspective. We are directed to see the world in terms of a kingdom not a market – God's kingdom where Jesus Christ is the Monarch.

These two perspectives – that of the consumer and that of the disciple – could not be more unlike each other. The marketplace mentality is to seek the best deal for oneself – that which will benefit you personally in terms of pleasure, reputation, convenience, finance or personal comfort. It assumes a self-centred outlook – either overtly or covertly. But the kingdom dethrones the self. It puts Jesus first, even above family and friends, Luke 14.26. Christ said, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...' Matthew 6.33.

This leads to a different way of life. It does not start with the question, 'What would most benefit me and mine?' It is not first 'What would I like?' It starts by asking 'What are the current needs of God's kingdom and what can I do to help?' When we see the answer to that question we act appropriately.

### **Discipleship?**

It is this attitude of truly prioritizing the glory of Jesus and the needs of his church that constitutes true Christian discipleship. 'And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"', Mark 8.34-36.

Notice the contrast here between the consumer's marketplace mentality and true discipleship.

- The marketplace prioritizes the self – saving your life. Jesus teaches we must learn to fight against and deny self-centredness.
- The marketplace is about finding the best life now. True discipleship is about intentionally taking up the cross – the instrument of death.
- The marketplace is about 'profit' and 'gain' of various kinds. Jesus speaks in terms of us 'losing' our lives for the sake of him and the gospel.

Does this analysis make us feel uncomfortable? There are many discipleship courses on the (Christian) market these days and many churches run discipleship courses, especially for those new to Biblical faith. But somehow, we do not seem to be making many real disciples – disciples in the sense Jesus talked about – who deny themselves, take up the cross and in practice follow him, Mark 8.34.

This dichotomy between marketplace attitudes and NT discipleship is a theme which underlies and runs throughout this booklet as we consider how churches attract people and how people choose churches today.

## **Chapter 1: How do people choose a church?**

The truth is that there is now a marketplace of churches. This marketplace stretches across denominations, confessions of faith, stances on ethical issues and church 'brands'. People are quite willing to switch and travel long distances for the 'right church for us'. Churches are in competition for members.

As I have contact with pastors around the country, repeatedly I hear the story of visitors who look in at a church but don't return, or of those who decide to come fairly regularly but hang loose and won't become members or get too involved. It would be wrong and foolish to dismiss churches where this happens as 'bad churches'. In NT terms, many of them are in good spiritual health regarding truth, faith and love. But it seems that is not good enough. People are looking for something else – something more from a church.

And in particular, there is a failure to commit. 'I can't find people who will take up responsibilities.' 'We need workers. At present we can't really do any outreach.' Those are some recent cries from good gospel men who are pastors of churches.

So, what is going on? The answer is that the market and the market mindset is against them. The cards which make for the choices of Christian people are stacked against the ordinary local church.

### **The Christian consumer**

Think about the wider UK landscape. We live in an affluent society where there are many options for people. We can buy an amazing variety of goods and services from houses to hotdogs, from haircuts to holidays and more. The heart of consumer culture, which distinguishes it from say a communist society, is personal choice. With almost boundless scope, we can have precisely what we desire (so long as we can pay). The dominant thought in people's minds is, 'where can I get the best deal for myself?'

Unconsciously that same marketplace mindset of personal choice has infiltrated the picking and choosing of many Christians regarding churches.

When it comes to preferences, what influences the choices of today's people? Years ago, Francis Schaeffer explained that the direction of the secular consumer society is towards personal peace and prosperity. The whole of our technology is geared towards making things easier for us. The line of least resistance beckons powerfully to our contemporaries.

It seems that this same attitude expresses itself when it comes down to the choice of church. Many of the population, including Christians, are under a great deal of pressure at work. They are likely to have a large mortgage to pay and a family to feed. They have to put in long hours during the week. So, when it comes to the weekend and to church, what are they looking for? They are looking for an easy option. They are looking not so much to be challenged as to be uplifted and looked after.

### **Market forces for churches**

I know I'm simplifying here, but that often boils down to four things. These are the market forces which it appears influence many Christians. They are looking for:

1. A fun Sunday School, which will mean that they won't have to fight their kids to get them to church.
2. A gifted music group that gives uplifting performances.
3. A preacher who expounds a passage of Scripture in a lively and entertaining way, reassuring them of the love of God and not expecting too much by way of sacrifice.
4. A congregation with people similar to themselves where they can find a comfortable friendship group.

This quartet is what meets their needs.

But here's the initial problem. Most ordinary churches, with ordinary pastors just don't match up. They might manage one or two out of the four, but they can't tick all the boxes. Rather, from the point of view of this consumer mindset, most ordinary churches look like a lot of hard work.

I listened with sympathy recently, as yet another pastor told me about receiving a phone call from a man whose family had come to his church three or four times. 'We've decided yours is not the church for us. We are going elsewhere. There are no children the age of our children.' The pastor said he had to restrain himself from shouting down the phone, 'Well how are there ever going to be children the age of your children unless someone like you comes!' So, that family, like many others, said 'goodbye'.

## **A deceptive magnetism**

The four 'must haves' for consumer Christians can of course be provided by the bigger churches. Often the church has been consciously crafted to fit the bill. So, they draw people like a magnet. They have the trained and gifted paid staff. They may well have a preacher with a UK-wide reputation. They have a group of great musicians. Thus, the ordinary churches shrink and the bigger churches grow. The local church is undermined. (We will consider this later).

But in a sense, maybe that is not the point.

The matter of personal choice in the marketplace is deeply interwoven with personal identity. The kind of goods I buy, the kinds of clothes I wear, the kind of music I listen to, the kind of lifestyle I adopt tells you a lot about who I am and who I wish to be perceived to be. And similarly, the kind of church I choose says a great deal about the kind of Christian I am.

At its worst – and this thankfully is not the case with all large evangelical churches – the big church simply supports a kind of 'Christian' life which is almost indistinguishable from that of respectable, common-sense secular middle-class people (apart from church attendance on a Sunday morning). Little involvement is required. The professional staff provide everything necessary. All you have to do is turn up. It punches the card of belonging to a church and that's good enough in most evangelical circles today.

## **Dangerous**

In his recent book on Tim Keller's life, Collin Hansen, has a telling quote from Richard Lovelace: '...pastors gradually settle down and lose interest in being change agents in the church. An unconscious conspiracy arises between their flesh and that of their congregations. It becomes tacitly understood that the laity will give pastors special honor (*sic*) in the exercise of their gifts, if the pastors will agree to leave their congregation's pre-Christian lifestyles undisturbed and do not call for the mobilization of lay gifts for the work of the kingdom. Pastors are permitted to become ministerial superstars. Their pride is fed as their congregations are permitted to remain herds of sheep in which each has carefully turned to his own way.'<sup>1</sup>

It is a very comfortable form of Christianity. However, it sits at a great distance from denying self, taking up the cross and following Jesus for the sake of God's kingdom and spreading the gospel to needy areas. True discipleship becomes theoretical. This

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller: *His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*, by Collin Hansen, Zondervan 2023, page 97

is actually a very dangerous place to be. That is because it is one thing to call Jesus Lord and another thing for him to be Lord of our lives. 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand...crash!' Matthew 7.26.

### **Better preaching?**

A frequent defence of 'committing' to a big church is that 'we are here because the ministry is so good.' But there are a couple of things to be said about that.

*First*, though that attitude may have an element that is commendable, it still leans towards the spiritual consumer attitude. Church is about what I take away, not so much about what I give or how I serve. This is very different from the NT's teaching concerning what church should be about. In the NT we find that the church is meant to be a body in which every member serves others.

*Second*, these days I am not too convinced that the preaching in many larger churches is that much better. I listened to a friend just this week as I am writing who goes to a packed-out church each Sunday. She said, 'Quite frankly, the preaching is boring.' The emperor has no clothes, but no-one likes to say. The buzz of being together in the social whirl of a big congregation keeps the momentum going. Certainly, if the preaching at some of the bigger Christian conferences I have attended recently is anything to go by, I have heard Scripture passages handled far better and more powerfully in quite a few less well-known churches.

### **No other vision?**

I was talking about my fears for larger churches to an ordinary pastor recently and he hit me with a very perceptive comment. 'The trouble is,' he said, 'in fact, all the smaller churches and their pastors dream of being like those larger market-leader churches you describe. They have no other vision to which to aspire.' That was a sting in the tail for me – I wasn't expecting that. So, don't just blame the large churches. In reality it is the way all of evangelicalism thinks – more or less. We have bought into the market rather than the NT. It leaves a big question concerning those who have set the vision for the churches in recent years. Did they really think through what they were doing when they wrote that book or spoke at that conference?

But it is time to change tack slightly. How do pastors tend to navigate the marketplace?

## Chapter 2: The pastor in the marketplace

There is an elephant in the room.

The stark truth is that far fewer men are coming forward to train for the ministry these days than there are churches who need pastors. There are fewer men offering for the ministry than there are pastors coming up to retirement. This raises the question of supply and demand.

This is a big matter for the future of evangelical churches, but I am not hearing many conversations about it or plans to try to deal with it. Generally speaking, theological seminaries in the UK are far from over-subscribed. Some are struggling to survive.

As an indication of the situation, I heard a leader speak not too long ago about hosting a conference for around 100 male and female apprentices in churches. One of the reasons apprentice schemes were set up originally was to provide an initial path into future ministry. On this particular conference there were four seminar tracks linked to possible options for ministry. I'm speaking from memory, but I think they were counselling, youth work, leading worship and preaching. Of the 100 apprentices only 12 chose the preaching track. Setting aside for the moment the issue of women preaching, it nevertheless seems to indicate that the role of pastor/preacher is not highly sought after by the rising generation. Supply is drying up.

Are we okay with that?

### Reasons

Many reasons for this dearth of pastoral candidates, spring to mind. Here are a few:

- Pastoral work for the non-celebrity pastor is hard work and not usually well paid. Men hesitate to expose themselves and their families to a life of relative poverty and spiritual battle.
- Many congregations do not really get behind their pastors, but almost treat them as employees, forever on trial. They are only as good as their last sermon. Men do not relish such a prospect.

- The advent of safeguarding, political correctness and pastoral ‘best practice’ (often informed by secular ideas) has made the work of a pastor a minefield for many<sup>2</sup>. ‘How long would it be,’ a young man thinks to himself, ‘before I fall foul of someone I am trying to help and am accused of “spiritual abuse”?’
- The idea of a clear call from the Holy Spirit to pastoral ministry has been so denigrated and attacked in recent decades that maybe men now have great difficulty in even recognising God’s call.

For gifted men with good hearts, it is understandable if they come to the conclusion that to help Christ’s cause simply by remaining as a lay preacher is the best way forward for them. And that means they can enjoy the best of both worlds – a secular salary and a slot in the pulpit from time to time. They don’t feel able to launch out in faith and live by the gospel, 1 Corinthians 9.6f.

### **Marketplace choices**

With few able men feeling the call, and many churches in need of pastoral oversight, the common market forces of supply and demand have come into play with a vengeance.

The lack of competent men coming through Bible colleges spells bad news, especially for smaller churches. Gifted seminary graduates who have had a season of experience as an assistant are in great demand and are often able to pick and choose between churches.

Rather too predictably it is the larger churches which land these men. They usually are located in cities and the more affluent areas of the country. They offer better accommodation and higher salaries to their staff. Further, quite frequently the new man will be joining a pastoral team where he will only be expected to preach at most once a week. The pressures and deadlines are not too difficult to handle.

I am aware of a number of such churches, with nowhere near the size of congregation of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Spurgeon’s day, who insist ‘we are now a ‘two-pastor church’. Some churches have three pastors. Meanwhile smaller churches and congregations in less well-off locations struggle to interest even one man to become their pastor.

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<sup>2</sup> I am not in any way denying the need for safeguarding in churches here. It is much needed but can be misused.

## **The best deal?**

In the last chapter we looked at how market forces operate when it comes to Christians choosing which church to attend. But the market also seems to have a huge part to play when it comes to young men choosing pastorates. The marketplace mentality prevails. The 'best deal' usually wins the day. It appears that we think and choose in a way that unconverted and worldly people would have no difficulty recognising.

If what I have described is anywhere near the truth of how things work in contemporary evangelicalism it must raise questions. It seems light years away from the apostle Paul's *Star Trek* approach to ministry 'to boldly go where no man has gone before', (cf. Romans 15.20). It is not even in the same ballpark as pastor Epaphroditus who 'almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life' to help Paul, Philippians 2.30. It doesn't seem even to harmonize with those of the household of Stephanas who 'devoted themselves to the service of the saints,' 1 Corinthians 16.15. Yet it was such folk as these that Paul encouraged the churches to 'honour' and 'submit to'.<sup>3</sup>

If the larger wealthier churches have little problem in finding candidates for pastoral positions while the more ordinary or smaller, poorer churches can hardly attract a single reply to their advertisements, doesn't that indicate that it is marketplace considerations which are governing the thinking even of potential pastors?

## **Weird pastors and needy churches**

The situation of small supply and great demand is both serious and quite dangerous when it comes to churches and leaderships. Churches can be tempted to rush into foolish choices.

Some young men who are utterly ill-fitted for the ministry see the desperate need the churches have for pastors and put themselves forward to fill the gap. Often, they have a romantic idea of what being a pastor entails. They mean no harm, but their idea of a pastor is of someone who spends almost every day in his library reading books and listening online to sermons concerning the Bible passage he is studying, and then synthesizing a sermon out of what he has gleaned. On Sunday he comes forth from his study to deliver his message with the hope that people will be helped and he himself will be much admired. These dear brothers have the air of a theological 'anorak' or a 'nerd' about them and insist that 'the preaching of the word'

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2.29; 1 Corinthians 16.16.

is the answer to everything. In fact, though preaching is very important, a church leader needs people skills (which they don't possess) and a lot more – being hospitable for a start, 1 Timothy 3.2. Frequently they are men with bees in their bonnets about this or that matter which ruin fellowship and functionally exclude outsiders who need the gospel.

Then what happens is that a small and needy church finds that such a man replies to their advertisement for a pastor. After meeting the man and hearing him preach, the church knows that he does not match up to the requirements for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3.1-7 and Titus 1.5-9, yet because there is no-one else out there, they decide to take him on as their pastor. The result at best is a moribund ministry and at worst a deadening ministry. The church has a pastor but is on the road to closing. Better no pastor than a bad pastor.

### **What has become of us?**

It seems (I hope I'm wrong) that we are only paying lip service to the kind of dedicated discipleship of which the NT speaks. 'They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me' the Lord Jesus once said, Mark 7.6. And this appears to be the case for both Christian people and potential church leaders.

The words of a young pastor were reported to me recently to the effect that 'to take on a small struggling church is suicide'. But where are the current needs of Christ kingdom? Aren't they often on those difficult council estates and in those poorer areas where addiction and gang culture reign and the local fellowship of believers is struggling to survive. Are there any brave Christian men and women out there who will forsake comfort and convenience in order to support a weak church and reach out to the lost and marginalised?

The words of another pastor of an older generation stick with me. He went to Bible College not too long after WWII when a different kind of spirit prevailed. The man recalls asking one of his fellow students who was coming to the end of his course where he was hoping to become a minister. The reply he got was startling. The fellow student reportedly said, 'I want to go where there is the most devil and the least money'. 'The most devil' – in other words where the needs of Christ's kingdom are greatest. 'The least money' – where there is the least temptation to get diverted from the task. No doubt we can make a joke about whether or not his wife would agree with him if he was married, but one cannot but honour the zeal and fervour of the man.

## **What actions?**

What can be done about the deathly grip of marketplace mentality? Here are a few suggestions.

If you are a conference speaker with a platform to speak to the rising generation of Christian men and women, could you not see your way to at least outlining the situation to them and drawing their attention to the needs?

If you are a Christian publisher, could you not commission some research and a trusted author to look deeply into the way the market is manipulating the churches and getting them to drift from their NT roots?

If you are a pastor of an ordinary church and you are nearing retirement, perhaps you should think seriously about who from within your congregation might make a future pastor. Maybe you should talk the situation through with them and, with their permission, begin to train them, 2 Timothy 2.2.

Whatever kind of pastor you are, get your congregation praying. All is not lost. Thankfully we have a living God who does hear us, Psalm 34.4. He is able to operate above and beyond the dead hand of the market. He is able to change minds and by his Spirit to raise up young men and families who think differently from the general consumer mindset. A young man can find that the hand of God is on him, and he is constrained by the love of Christ to strike out on a different path.

## Chapter 3: The local church in jeopardy

The Great Commission to the church is not about producing superficial ‘decisions’ for Christ but rather about setting the agenda of ‘making disciples’.

‘Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.”’ Matthew 28.16-20

Earlier in this booklet I suggested that, although there are many ‘discipleship courses’ available these days, we don’t seem to be very good at making disciples – people who will actually prioritise Christ and the needs of his kingdom in their lives rather than simply attend church while pursuing their own market-led ‘bucket list’ in life.

### **A missing essential?**

In his excellent exposition of the *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, Samuel Waldron makes a compelling case for the idea that a well-ordered local church is the essential environment for growing true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

‘Christ’s command to his people to walk together in particular churches is more than simply another one of his precepts. This precept creates the structure or context in which the Great Commission...is carried out. Jesus desires that his disciples be taught to observe all that he commanded. How shall this be accomplished? By the creation of local churches, with local teacher-elders. Jesus commands such churches in Matthew 18.15-20. If Jesus commands that offences be brought to the church and commands the church to rebuke such offences and ultimately to exclude the impenitent, then necessarily he commands the existence of such local churches. The stated purpose of the church in this passage is to teach an erring member one of Christ’s commands by calling him to repentance and, if necessary, by its disciplinary action.

‘Jesus also gives a mandate to such local churches through the example of his apostles. The apostle Paul, Christ’s personal representative, fulfilled the Great Commission everywhere he went by forming local churches and appointing elder-teachers in those churches. Three instructive examples of this may be mentioned. In

Lystra, Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia, Paul personally founded such churches and appointed such local teachers, Acts 14.21-23'<sup>4</sup>

It is no exaggeration to say that the local church is God's main vehicle for discipleship and the fulfilment of his plans for the people of the world.

### **Making disciples**

It is only in such local churches that Christians can learn at a practical level Christ's commands and so be made disciples of Jesus. Here, together, we learn outreach, love, humility, welcome, wholeheartedness, one-another care, openness, forgiveness and freedom from resentment (see Matthew 18). Without this immersive experience of relating deeply to other people under the teaching of Christ, we tend not to make disciples but to end up just confirming more-or-less middle-class secular attitudes plus a belief in penal substitution. We fail to produce true disciples.

And, beneath the references to the original apostles, we find an emphasis on the local church hinted at in the Great Commission itself (see second paragraph of this chapter). The disciples are gathered in fellowship, v16, v18. We note the Great Commission is given in the context of the worship of Jesus, v17. The commands of Jesus are to be taught, v20. And the Commission is evangelism of the nations, v19. We have disciples gathered for worship and teaching and witness with Jesus in the midst. Fellowship, worship, teaching and witness for Christ – those are the components of a local church, aren't they? The local church it seems is pictured in the final paragraph of Matthew's Gospel.

But though the local church is so crucial to the mission and kingdom of Christ, the truth is that the market mindset undermines and vitiates the building of local churches. These days many Christians drive past their ordinary local church in order to attend a large, more glitzy congregation where all their 'needs' are met.

Many larger evangelical churches tend to intentionally grow by identifying and majoring on the four market incentives which attract churchgoers – Sunday school, music, slick sermons and young people / families (we mentioned them in chapter 1). They play to personal preferences in a consumer marketplace society. In doing so, the ordinary local church is undermined. People can even be tempted to leave the harder work of being involved in a smaller church, where everyone has to pull their weight, for the relaxed atmosphere of a large and 'successful' congregation.

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<sup>4</sup> *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, by Samuel Waldron, Evangelical Press, 1989, page 317

## **The problem of money**

Often the real (though frequently unrecognised) problem with larger congregations is to do with money. More people mean larger offerings and more money in the church bank account. But this brings spiritual problems.

Listen to Bobby Jamieson: 'In a modern market society, money is power. Money promises security and calm. The more money you have the more problems you can prevent or purchase your way out of. Money is an all-purpose rescue dog, the most versatile Swiss Army knife. As Harmut Rosa observes, money "serves secularised capitalist society as a replacement for religion by taking the place of God as a master of contingency." Money promises control, freedom from disaster, and freedom from worry. Money displaces God not only as highest good but as refuge in time of need.'<sup>5</sup> Replacing God. No wonder the Lord Jesus in the Gospels has such a lot of warnings to his disciples about money (see Matthew 6.24 for example).

In practice how does this reliance on money move us away from true discipleship?

## **Dismembering the body of Christ**

*First*, it erodes the desire for church planting in needy areas. What tends to happen as a large church becomes larger is that both leadership and people are not ready to take any risks or embark on any adventures. They have become used to the comfort of a large congregation and the control that money brings. A policy of the rich fool 'I will pull down my barns to build bigger ones', Luke 12.18 tends to prevail. 'We have a large church – let's have an even larger one – let's build a even bigger building.' And this happens to the neglect of the needs of lost people and of Christ's kingdom – or indeed of other smaller churches who could benefit from a helping hand. The large market-led church becomes somewhat self-satisfied, in-grown and parochial.

*Second*, an Inadvertent message is sent to the members of a large and rich congregation. It is 'we don't need you'. It is 'we can run the church without you so its okay for you to hang loose. It is 'we can always employ more staff to get done what needs to be done'. This is to discount the whole NT emphasis on the need to work together and support one another so essential to the learning of true discipleship. It is to discount all the apostles' 'one-another' commandments and so dismember the body of Christ. Indeed, in many churches which rely on money and paid staff they don't even bother with the idea of a church membership. Church attendance on its own will do, without getting too involved.

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<sup>5</sup> *Everything is Never Enough*, by Bobby Jamieson, WaterBrook publishing 2025, page 61

## **Driving past**

So as people drive by in order to attend the churches that are market leaders in providing an easy Christian Sunday experience, it looks like yet another nail in the coffin of ordinary local churches.

Market forces are in play, and that being the case, sadly, it seems that a number of those forces are working towards the destruction of local churches – churches where people live in fairly close proximity, where the congregation is intentionally aiming at being a family, and where every member has a responsible part to play in the life of the church and so true disciples are made. Such churches are finding things increasingly difficult to attract members. Many such churches are fragile and even dwindling. Thankfully that is not the case everywhere. But it is happening.

## Chapter 4: Sacrifice as the path to blessing

The reason that this destruction of true discipleship is so subtle and creeps up on churches almost without them realising it, is that there is nothing sinful or actually wrong with those four enticements which often draw people to larger, comfortable congregations. It is good to have a Sunday School which children enjoy. There is nothing wrong with fine sounding music. There is nothing wrong with having a well thought out and interesting sermon – so long as it is Biblical. There is nothing wrong with Christians meeting friends of their own age in church.

It is when these things become the priority for Christians over the denial of self and supporting of needy local churches that we run into trouble. When convenience and comfort become more important than planting new churches and the needs of Christ's kingdom, we are in sin.

### **What can ordinary churches do?**

As things stand, the answer to the subhead question is, 'Not much.' The market dominates. But here are a few things to think about.

*First*, of course, it is not wrong for smaller local churches to major on and advertise what they do best. These are things like family atmosphere, personal pastoral attention and giving an outlet for everyone's gifts. (However, maybe even that is simply the local churches parroting the market. It is to accept the *status quo* and get involved in the competition game.)

*Second*, maybe it's a good idea for the pastor of the ordinary local church to explain the church marketplace to his congregation in his preaching so that they know what they are up against as a church and understand why very often visitors don't stay. It's often not that your church is no good. It's that they have a different (unbiblical) agenda. If the pastor can cast a different and more Biblical vision of what they, as a church, are about, that will help too. They will know that in battling to be a proper local church they are doing the right thing and so not be so easily discouraged.

But, *thirdly*, and more importantly, a pastor of a smaller church can recognise that his highest calling is to develop his own communion with God. When, because of his grace, our own hearts are genuinely thrilled with God himself, it transforms ministry and lifts us above the deadly competition game into a large-heartedness that will bless the whole church. Instead of being distracted by where we sit in the league table of churches, we joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **What should consumer churches do?**

I am tempted to label these 'non-disciple churches' – but that may be going too far. Whatever we call them, what they need to do is change. They need to change from the in control, comfortable outlook to an outlook of adventure and risk taking, which actually produces disciples. How can that be achieved? Here are three things to bear in mind.

- *Preaching*

All healthy change in a church begins in the pulpit with an open Bible.

If we are going to break out of Christian consumerism, there needs to be a much clearer distinction made by the pastor between middle-class 'niceness' and true Christian discipleship. I have no doubt that Nicodemus was a nice man. But he needed his life turned upside down in a way that could only be described as being born again, John 3.8. He was religious, he was respectable, but he needed to be given spiritual sight to see the sheer enormity of who Jesus is, to understand his work and to put him first in his life.

There needs to be a sharper preaching of the fact that though we are saved by faith alone, yet faith without works is dead, James 2.17 – and the works that James has in mind are those of costly giving. To take an explicit example, in former years pastors could often be heard challenging the people of their congregation to think about whether the Lord was calling them to the mission field or some other costly service. Rarely do you hear such messages today (except perhaps at a missions' conference). But even if hearers were not called to mission, nevertheless such messages set the tone of sacrificial service for the church as a whole.

Jesus teaches that the way to real blessing is the way of sacrifice, of intentionally missing out, of dying to worldly ambitions. 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it to eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me...' John 12.24-26. These central lessons of true Christianity need to be applied pointedly afresh in opposition to the self-centred marketplace mentality of the twenty-first century.

- *Personnel*

This note of sacrificial Christian living needs to be seen as the lifestyle of those who are leaders in the church.

It is the leaders – the elders and deacons – who tend to be the folk people look up to and who therefore set the ‘culture’ of a church. You therefore need to have leaders who are obviously sacrificial disciples of Christ – not just efficient building or money managers or whatever. My wife and I were very blessed through knowing two such elders of a church in Liverpool. These men were brothers and had been instrumental in setting up a local church. But the time came when the church needed its own building. In order to lead the way in purchasing a building in which God’s people could meet, these men sold their houses and bought smaller ones in order to release capital for the purchase of the new venue. It is personnel such as these who are prepared to make real sacrifices for the good and growth of Christ’s kingdom who will, by their example, shape a culture of real discipleship in a local church. And through their sacrifice (and that of their wives and families) the church was much blessed.

And, of course, it is the pastor himself who is particularly called to lead by example. He must not preach to others what he would never consider doing himself. Paul could write to the Philippians: Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ’ Philippians 3.17-18. Paul is talking here about those who call themselves Christians – hence the tears. Later in the letter he re-emphasizes the same thing: ‘What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you,’ Philippians 4.9. If the pastor makes his job too comfortable his people will be content to make their lives comfortable too and true discipleship disappears. Sadly, these days, people will flock to the church where not too much is expected of them.

- *Planning*

It is a wonderful thing when a church has resources which enable it to contemplate doing things which other churches would simply not have the money or the manpower to even contemplate realistically. How are we going to move forward? We need to plan carefully.

But the question is ‘Will those plans simply serve ourselves and our church or will they have a view which encompasses the wider needs of God’s kingdom?’ Yes, it’s good for a church to consolidate itself. But having done that, shouldn’t we be looking out not just for ourselves but for other brothers and sisters in more difficult situations than our own. Shouldn’t we be looking at planting a church in a needy part of town? Shouldn’t we be thinking about how to come alongside (not lord it over) a needy church in a nearby town to help them get stronger and be revitalized? In other

words, the culture of denying self, taking up the cross and following Jesus in true discipleship ought to be reflected in the plans the church is making.

In such matters, again what is crucial is the quality of leadership. Often doing something new and risky, like planting a new congregation requires a sacrificial leader who will say to the church 'I'm doing this – who is prepared to come with me?' Without such a brave call the consumer church will remain self-satisfied and unmoved.

Do the plans discussed at your church members' meetings reflect a concern for true discipleship?

These three areas of preaching, leadership personnel and planning are crucial in shaping the culture of a church.

## **Conclusion**

God has given me the privilege of occasionally being a mentor to those who are pastors in training. This was part of my brief sometimes when I was in ministry myself and also in more recent years in 'retirement'.

Where I have tended to start with men is to get them to read through the NT and then write a short essay on the subject of the type of church they hope, under God, to be instrumental in building. This gives us a good basis on which to begin to discuss vital areas of ministry.

As we have thought a little in this booklet about church consumerism versus true discipleship it is appropriate to leave the reader with a similar question. What kind of church do you hope to build?



