

## Appendix 3: Wells

As I noted in the Introduction, when I had the bulk of my manuscript well underway, I was given a copy of David F. Wells' *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2008. I found so much in that book that I simply had to use, and here is some of it.

Wells raised some of the divisions that exist among contemporary evangelicals. Of course evangelicals have always been divided, but the contemporary divisions, for many, are very different to the old divisions. For a growing number of evangelicals today, the old points of disagreement do not count. They are irrelevant. In fact, it goes deeper than that. The old divisions, the old contested points, are a very serious drag on what is needed today; they get in the way. In the way of what? What, for many evangelicals, is the aim? To reach the 'unchurched'. So says the modern evangelical. Here is the cardinal issue – reaching the 'unchurched'. And church has become *the* place to reach the 'unchurched'.

And here is another vital point. The old evangelical would talk about sinners, the lost, the ungodly, unbelievers. Many modern evangelicals talk about 'the community', the 'unchurched'. This is a fundamental point, a real issue driving me to write this book.

Wells:

What is now dividing the evangelical world is not what used to divide it. The older distinctions were doctrinal. Doctrinal differences were what pitted Baptists against [infant baptisers], [set one prophetic school against another], Congregationalists against Presbyterians, Arminians against Calvinists, ordainers of women against non-ordainers, and tongues-speakers against cessationists. These issues are still alive and they still stir passions. I have a position on each

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one, and I think they are important inasmuch as each is an attempt to find the teaching of the word of God.

[But] what is different [now] is that these are not the differences that seem to matter today. The old map was drawn by differences of doctrine. When all is said and done today, many evangelicals are indifferent to doctrine – certainly they are when they ‘do church’. Privately, no doubt, there are doctrines that are believed. But in the church... well, that is different because, many think, doctrine is an impediment as we reach out to new generations.<sup>1</sup>

So, what’s new?

In the last two or three decades,<sup>2</sup> evangelicals have discovered culture... What they want to know about culture is simple and easy to unearth. They want to know what the trends and fashions are that are disturbing<sup>3</sup> the surface of contemporary life. They have no interest at all in what lies beneath the trends, none on how our modernised culture in the West shapes personal horizons, produces appetites, and provides us [with] ways of processing the meaning of life. All that seems like pretty complex and useless stuff. Pragmatists, to the last drop of blood, these evangelicals are now in the cultural waters, not to understand what is there, but to get something going.<sup>4</sup> They are there with their surfboards trying to get a little forward motion as each tiny ripple makes its way toward the shore. This quest for success, which passes under the language of ‘relevance’, is what is partitioning the evangelical world into its three segments.<sup>5</sup>

Before we move on to the ‘three segments’ to which Wells referred, we need to take stock.

For many evangelicals, culture has replaced doctrine; culture, not doctrine, is the burning issue today. Not, as Wells observed, that these evangelicals are really interested in

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<sup>1</sup> Wells pp2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Wells was writing in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Wells had ‘ruffling’.

<sup>4</sup> Wells had ‘some movement’.

<sup>5</sup> Wells pp2-4.

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culture. What makes them tick is how they can harness – exploit – culture for their own purpose.

And he had a warning:

What makes for a bond with culture makes for a rupture... with the ways of God.<sup>6</sup>

Wells went on:

Again and again the issue that has emerged [from evangelicals' flirtation (my word, DG) with culture]... is whether evangelicals will build their churches *sola Scriptura*,<sup>7</sup> or *sola cultura*<sup>8</sup>... Actually, to be quite honest, the question is raised by only a few on the sidelines, and in many evangelical churches the question barely even makes sense... Of course, I know that the issue does not present itself in this way. Evangelicals who live *sola cultura* all claim to be living *sola Scriptura*. So it is very important for us to be able to untangle these questions and see them for what they are... We need to see how the older, classical evangelicals first mutated into a segment of marketers,<sup>9</sup> and then mutated again to a segment of emergents.<sup>10</sup>

I need to pause and define these terms.

**Classical evangelicals**, convinced that Scripture is the sole authority, thought scriptural doctrine was vital. And they fought tooth and nail to preserve what they saw as truth recorded in Scripture. This was a powerful driver for all they did, perhaps the most powerful driver; truth, scriptural truth, was paramount in their thinking. They knew what they believed, and they stood for it, come what may.

**Marketers** identify what people want, and they do what they can to provide it.

**Emergents** want to do away with labels and institutional church, and are committed to dialogue with the pagan culture. While I agree with much of the idea of getting rid of labels

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<sup>6</sup> Wells p60.

<sup>7</sup> That is, under the sole authority of the word of God.

<sup>8</sup> That is, under the sole authority of culture.

<sup>9</sup> Persons or companies that advertise or promote something.

<sup>10</sup> Wells p4.

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and the institutional, it is the emergents' way of handling culture that is wrong. The apostolic way – see, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:16 – was to confront the cultures, not to compromise with them.<sup>11</sup>

Wells:

Emergents... know they are standing outside the house, whereas the seeker-sensitives, the marketers, still imagine that they are living inside it.<sup>12</sup>

So, in the thinking of many an evangelical, as culture has gone up, so doctrine has gone down.

Wells:

In the 1970s and 1980s, on every side and in almost every way, it was becoming clear that ways of thinking doctrinally were wearing very thin. The capacity to think doctrinally was being lost as new leaders emerged, as the leadership of the evangelical world shifted from the older pastor-theologians to the new entrepreneurial organisation builders, and as churches began to reflect this change in their attitudes and worship...

The erosion in biblical ways of thinking at first passed almost unnoticed. Nevertheless, after a while it was hard to miss the fact that this was happening. No doubt there were many specific causes. Campus organisations were undoubtedly reducing [the]<sup>13</sup> Christian faith to its most minimal form. And as serious biblical preaching in the churches diminished, ignorance of biblical truth became commonplace. *But the largest factor in this internal change, I think, was that evangelicalism began to be infested by the culture in which it was living.* And then Christianity became increasingly

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<sup>11</sup> See my 'Confronting The Cultures'; 'The Clash Of The Cultures'; 'Need Not Want: A Warning'. See the chapter 'Paul at the Areopagus: The Antithesis of Relationship Evangelism'.

<sup>12</sup> Wells p18. Wells was saying that the emergents have no time for the institutional church, but the seeker-sensitives want to be part of it.

<sup>13</sup> I am sure Wells was speaking of 'faith' in the objective sense – what it is that is believed. Hence my use of the definite article. But subjective faith is not ruled out; that is, 'trust'. In which case the definite article would not be required.

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reduced simply to private, internal, therapeutic experience. Its doctrinal form atrophied and then crumbled.<sup>14</sup>

Wells went on:

The slide... has continued. Indeed, it has gathered speed and momentum. Here, though, we need [to] explore the inevitable result in only one area. What had started out as a strategy for building the evangelical movement, in fact ended up weakening the whole surrounding fabric of belief. And it is now worse than that. This weakening process did not stop at the periphery. It has entered the central core.

The unravelling of evangelical truth was signalled initially in an odd series of definitional tags that became evident in the 1980s and 1990s. That was when a whole series of hybrids emerged: feminist evangelicals, ecumenical evangelicals, liberal evangelicals, liberals who were evangelical, charismatic evangelicals, Catholic evangelicals, evangelicals who were Catholic, and so it went [on]. The additional tag – be it feminist, Catholic, or charismatic – signalled that the additional interest was at least as important as the core principles of what defined who an evangelical was. Indeed, the additional interest usually said far more about the person's interests than anything else. The core principles, in fact, were losing their power to shape people, define the movement, prescribe who was, and who was not, an evangelical.

This weakness has now grown and become more aggravated. It is clear for all to see in the way that marketers do their business.<sup>15</sup>

Wells continued:

Evangelicalism began to think of itself apart from the church. This was not simply a matter of organisation but of attitude. And this sentiment has only accelerated as the marketers began to play the market. Past traditions of believing, distinctive church architecture, doctrinal language, and the formalities of traditional church life all seemed like baggage that needed to be shed as rapidly as possible. Suddenly it was becoming an embarrassment.

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<sup>14</sup> Wells p8, emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> Wells pp8-9.

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But along with these changes came something else. Whereas previously the churches have been a focal point for Christian believers, now they lost that place. As unlikely as it seems, many churches in a sense disappeared. They became entirely parachurch in nature!<sup>16</sup>

Let me stress this. As I have explained, according to Scripture, the *ekklēsia* is to do with believers, and virtually nothing to do with unbelievers. Staggering as this will seem to the overwhelming majority today, nevertheless it is an undeniable fact. I know believers must do good to all men (Gal. 6:10), but to use that verse to dismantle the entire fabric and purpose of the *ekklēsia* and erect a factory, or a series of production lines within a factory, to cater for the ungodly is nothing less than a prostitution of the text. Yes, believers in their private capacity, as they have opportunity, should be salt in society (Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:50; Col. 4:6), but this is utterly at variance with making the *ekklēsia* the vehicle for turning this into an industrial process or marketing enterprise.

So how did the marketers get to work in this new atmosphere? Wells:

The leaders of this marketing enterprise understood that they were in the market, and business customers had choices. The choices that began to be offered by way of competition, however, were all along the lines of not being churchy. This new direction was mightily reinforced by the emergence of the television ministries, especially in the 1980s, not to mention the pervasive availability of religious videos. Church life subsided in importance for many people, if only because on Sunday morning they could, and often did, ‘go to church’ in their living rooms in front of their television sets. One whole segment of the evangelical world decided to practice [the] Christian faith as if the whole notion of the church needed to disappear. Evangelicalism was becoming *para* in mentality, and the local church was about to become its chief casualty. This disappearing trick would never have

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<sup>16</sup> Wells pp10-11.

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been possible if evangelicals were still thinking in doctrinal terms. But they were not.<sup>17</sup>

Wells continued by rightly arguing that, for the marketers, the *ekklēsia* simply gets in the way. It gets in the way because *ekklēsia* life and what it stands for – Christ, the gospel – is totally – and I mean totally – unpalatable to the natural man; he hates it, he thinks that both he (Christ) and it (the gospel) are nothing but foolish, scandalous, a joke, irrelevant, an offence.<sup>18</sup> Paul set this out very clearly, acknowledging that the cross is offensive or a stumbling block to the ungodly. But at the same time he showed he was not going to tinker with the gospel to remove its scandal or make it ‘wise’ in the eyes of the world (Rom. 8:7-8; 9:33; 1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:14; Gal. 5:11; 6:12,14; 1 Pet. 2:8, for instance). In contrast, the marketers, recognising that the cross is a stumbling block, one which gets in the way of the church in its attempts to woo the ‘unchurched’, take steps to sanitise it.

Wells:

The truth is that without a biblical understanding of why God instituted it, the church easily becomes a liability in a market where it competes only with the greatest of difficulty against religious fare available in the convenience of one’s living room, and a culture bent on distraction and entertainment. Few demands are made by television preachers, or on borrowed DVDs, and every pitch for a financial contribution is subject to death by the mute button. That cannot be said of the preacher in a church!<sup>19</sup> This conquest by the market, accomplished silently and without any fanfare, has not only greatly diminished the church but, one has to say, has also greatly diminished what it means to be a Christian believer.

The constant cultural bombardment of individualism, in the absence of a robust theology, meant that faith that had rightly been understood as personal now easily became faith that

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<sup>17</sup> Wells p11. Of course, some believers are denied *ekklēsia* life through, among other things, illness, infirmity or lack of a local assembly (at least one which will welcome them).

<sup>18</sup> ‘Christ’ is useful to the natural man as an expletive.

<sup>19</sup> Walking out is an option, but the embarrassment can make this very difficult.

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was individualistic, self-focussed, and consumer oriented. That was the change to which the church marketers attuned themselves. Instead of seeing this as a weakness to be resisted, they used it as an opportunity to be exploited. Increasingly, [the] evangelical faith was released from any connections with the past, from every consideration except the self, and was imbued with no other objective than entrepreneurial success. As the evangelical experience was thus cut loose, it became increasingly cultural, increasingly empty, and increasingly superficial...

From the earlier classical evangelicals have come the marketers and then the emergents. Among the marketers, doctrine has vanished, and then the church. Among the emergents, doctrine also vanished but then, by way of reaction, there has been an attempt to recover a new sense of church. But without a clear sense of biblical truth, what is being drawn up in the net of recovery is often a strange mixture of ideas, traditions and practices.<sup>20</sup>

Wells pressed on:

The older, classical evangelicals created a movement with institutions, ministries and publications. The marketers rode on the back of this. They capitalised on all the achievements of the classical evangelicals, but they did so for their own purposes and success.<sup>21</sup>

He traced its history:

The church marketers are those who have followed the innovations in 'doing' church pioneered by Bill Hybels at Willow Creek Community Church in 1975... What was begun then has since been copied all over America. It has morphed into new forms and been exported to other parts of the world. Of course! This is America!

This approach, it is said, is seeking to preserve the old evangelical message while delivering it in new ways. *Its strategies have been borrowed from the corporate world.* The key idea is that there is a market for the Christian message. They utilise marketing techniques and proven entertainment formats to penetrate that market.

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<sup>20</sup> Wells pp11-12.

<sup>21</sup> Wells p13.



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This innovation seemed to be the train that was leaving town three decades ago,<sup>22</sup> and pastors by the thousands scrambled to get aboard. Here was the magic formula for success. Though a genuine passion for evangelism no doubt lay somewhere in the experiment, it was also wrapped in the most stunning cultural naïveté. It was entirely predictable that this experiment would, in due course, peak<sup>23</sup> and then lose its attraction, though there are always stragglers who keep chasing trends long after they have ceased to be fashionable. That is what is still happening.<sup>24</sup>

I break in. Wells' observation should sound alarm bells for Evans and his friends. If Wells is right, then it means that Evans and other UK marketers are buying an end-of-line model, one which already has passed its sell-by date, one which needs an immediate upgrade. Indeed, as we have already found,<sup>25</sup> Evans sees the problem:

One of the main issues to think about is not the first ten years of a church plant, but what happens when churches grow and start to level off, once the initial vision is realised. One senior leader's observation was that many church plants of the 1980s and 1990s had plateaued, and his conviction was we need to train leaders to keep churches growing into larger size brackets, rather than grow lots of small ones which stall.<sup>26</sup>

Wells went on to speak of the natural man's insatiable craving for novelty, the 'latest thing', as the advert gurus know only too well and exist to exploit:

This was, you see, the very latest thing. Here was a newly invented and freshly minted church world. It was a church world completely reconfigured around the sales pitch. Here was the gospel product as sleekly fashioned and as artfully sold as anything in the mall or on television. Here also were

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<sup>22</sup> Wells was writing in 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Wells had 'crest'.

<sup>24</sup> Wells p13, emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup> The following extract appears in the chapter 'Numbers and their Management'.

<sup>26</sup> Evans p91.

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churches smelling of coffee, and reverberating with edgy music. There were bright and exciting videos. And the professional singers rivalled any [singer] one might hear in Vegas. It was all put together in a package to please, entice, entertain, relax, grab and enfold potential customers, and worm its way into their hearts. There was, however, a generational focus. The generational target for the marketers has been the boomers.<sup>27</sup> The music is contemporary. Usually, though, ‘contemporary’ is no later, musically speaking, than the 1970s or early 1980s, because that is where boomers find their comfort zone. Rap or heavy metal would not be cool.

What results, all too often, beneath all the smiling crowds, the packed auditorium, is a faith so cramped, limited and minuscule as to be entirely unable to command our life, our energies, or, as a matter of fact, even much of our attention. One church advertises itself as a place where you can find ‘loud music’ and ‘short services’. It has a ‘casual atmosphere’ but, it wanted us to know, it also offers ‘serious faith’.<sup>28</sup>

But here comes the crunch. Wells:

This is always the rub in this experiment: the form greatly modifies the content.<sup>29</sup>

Yes, indeed. Marketers want the customers to look at the glitzy wrapping, not the merchandise. The method always trumps the message; that is, the packaging, the presentation, means more to most potential customers than the product. The message is thus warped by the marketer’s method. Think politics, think adverts, think church. For example, imagine a hell-fire sermon delivered by a preacher dressed and prancing about as a clown – bulbous red nose, big boots, baggy trousers, and all.

The world recognises that presentation is king. When the Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, repeated the mantra: ‘Education! Education! Education!’, what he really meant –

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<sup>27</sup> Not easy to tie down, but shall we say those born between 1945 and 1960?

<sup>28</sup> Wells pp13-14.

<sup>29</sup> Wells p14.

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what really happened – was ‘Presentation! Presentation! Presentation!’ Don’t take my word for it. Roy Hattersley (and he should know) spoke of the way New Labour under Blair ditched the embarrassing (for electoral purposes) Clause IV of the 1918 Labour party manifesto (that is, workers had to get their hands on all the levers of power).<sup>30</sup> In 1995, there was a brief discussion on the principle (cleverly managed and conducted at a time to minimise debate) until, as Hattersley cynically put it, the debate was ‘disposed of before coffee time’, after which, ‘we were able to turn to the aspects of policy we most enjoyed – not formulation but presentation’.<sup>31</sup> Hattersley remarked on Peter Mandelson’s brilliance in engineering all this, but did not fail to draw attention to the downside:

Image often took precedence over the ideas, and presentation, instead of being no more than a delivery system, was regarded as the mighty warhead which would blow the enemy to pieces.<sup>32</sup>

Wells went on:

The loud music and short services are part of the form, but the form, put together to be pleasing, actually undercuts the seriousness of the faith. The form is in fact the product, and in this market the sale has to be done quickly and as painlessly as possible because the customers all have itchy feet [actually, they have itching ears (2 Tim. 4:3), and now have ready means to travel to find what they want – DG].

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<sup>30</sup> ‘To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service’.

<sup>31</sup> Roy Hattersley: *Who Goes Home? Scenes from a Political Life*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1995, p292.

<sup>32</sup> Hattersley p293. There was no shortage in the number of examples he gave to illustrate what he was talking about. Here’s another that came after Hattersley’s book: think about the wrapping that sold the 2003 Iraq War to the citizens of the UK.

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That greatly militates against the seriousness any church wants to have. And that is why a deep chasm has opened between the church marketers and historic Protestant orthodoxy. It is less that the truths of this orthodoxy are assailed than that they are seen to be irrelevant to the building of the church.<sup>33</sup> They are, it is believed, an impediment to its success.<sup>34</sup>

Wells issued a warning which, as above, the UK marketers should heed. When he wrote (in 2008), the shine had already gone off the product, and many had come to regard it as outdated:

Not only are the bare bones of this approach now showing, but it has to reckon with the fact that people have also become bored with it. They want something new. It has been mainstreamed [that is, become boringly ‘normal’]. The marketing approach has become conventional in the American evangelical world, so now, people are thinking, it is time to move on. Frankly, there is no judgment more to be feared than this: you are now *passé*. That weighs more heavily even than words coming from the Great White Throne at the end of time. Imagine that! *Passé*.<sup>35</sup>

The marketers had gone to the world to see what ‘works’ and tried to ape and exploit it. But they failed to notice one important caveat well known in the commercial world. What worked today may not work tomorrow! Indeed, what worked today has to be replaced by a newer, better product. Notice how often modern evangelicals fasten on to things just too late. By no stretch of the imagination could anybody think me knowledgeable about modern ‘music’, but I understand that modern evangelicals seem to use ‘music’ that the world regards as old-fashioned. The advocates of Relationship

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<sup>33</sup> Compare Hattersley’s quotation of Richard Crossman’s ‘sad conclusion that British socialism “has lost its way not only because it lacks maps of the new country which it is crossing, but because it thinks maps are unnecessary for experienced travellers”’ (Hattersley p291).

<sup>34</sup> Wells p14.

<sup>35</sup> Wells p14.

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Evangelism will need to be wider awake and quicker on the ball than that!

I can illustrate. One Christmas, the UK frozen-food chain, Iceland, had dismal sales for its seasonal confectionery. They immediately put in train a massive effort to design a super new product for the next season. And it worked. The following Christmas, they topped the sales figures for confectionery. But – and here’s the rub – immediately after that Christmas they knew they had to get down to design another new product, an even better product, for the following Christmas – or else their sales figures would plummet, yet again. Last year’s model? No good! Church marketers need to keep this in mind and act accordingly! Keep on the move! If you don’t, the marketer down the road will offer a newer product, and your clients will simply move to get it. Loyalty no longer counts in the supermarket, despite the use of loyalty cards. A rival superstore is offering a better model or a lower price (preferably both)? Go for it! The same – precisely the same – applies to the marketer’s church.

Wells:

What has happened is not unlike the way fashion migrates socially, and then loses its attraction. Devotees of hip-hop culture, for example, are set apart by their getups, their tattoos, their piercings, jewellery, hoodies, off-kilter baseball caps, and trousers<sup>36</sup> that look like they were made by a drunken tailor. But what happens when the middle-class – or worse yet, the middle-aged – also begin to sport tattoos on their sagging skin, let their trousers<sup>37</sup> sag halfway down their thighs, and sport hoodies as well? The answer, of course, is that youth culture has a legitimate complaint. They have been robbed! Their distinctiveness has been lost! Their cachet on the street has been diminished! It is time for them to move on, fashion-wise. So it is here.<sup>38</sup>

Catch 22!

Wells:

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<sup>36</sup> Wells had ‘pants’.

<sup>37</sup> Wells had ‘pants’.

<sup>38</sup> Wells pp14-15.

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When the evangelical world became Willow Creek-ised, the sun began to set on Willow Creek. Its cachet went down the tubes.<sup>39</sup> If Willow Creek could not move on fashion-wise, others not quite so wedded to its particular mode of doing things could. And so it has happened.<sup>40</sup>

The result? In short:

[Among] evangelicals... there have been just too many instances of obnoxious empire-building going on, too much in evangelicalism that is partisan and small, too much pandering to seekers, and too much adaptation of the Christian message until little remains... There are too many of the [so-called] born-again who show no signs of regenerate life. For many people, the word 'evangelical' has become a synonym for what is trite, superficial... a byword for what has gone wrong with Protestantism.<sup>41</sup>

The remedy? Wells:

The key to the future is not the capitulation we see in both the marketers and the emergents. It is courage. The courage to be faithful to what Christianity in its biblical forms has always stood for across the ages.<sup>42</sup>

Let us pause to look at how marketers advertise their products. Take a glance at what is offered by Church Marketing, an organisation set up to help church marketers do their job, and do it better. Here is the blurp:

Implementing effective marketing strategies is essential to ensuring the growth and expansion of your church and outreach ministries. Having the proper tools for marketing efforts such as internet marketing allows you to increase programme-awareness, attract new parishioners and keep your audience in tune with your efforts. Let ChurchNet USA help direct attention to your organisational efforts with our

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<sup>39</sup> That is, failed, became old hat, was rejected, became a waste product.

<sup>40</sup> Wells p15.

<sup>41</sup> Wells p19.

<sup>42</sup> Wells p21.

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marketing solutions and spread the word regarding your services or needs.

What do we offer?

Our Church Marketing team has identified multiple marketing strategies to generate traffic to your organisation and showcase your good works. In helping you generate interest towards your organisations, we provide a free marketing review identifying strengths as well as opportunities for growth. Afterwards, we are able to move forward in church marketing solutions, including: Social Media, Search Engine Optimisation, Newsletters, Press Releases, Video Uploading, Cause Marketing, Mobile Marketing, Blogs, Branding, and Print Advertising Development such as Brochures, Flyers, and Postcards. We also offer Marketing Plan services to assist your organisation in developing a plan for future marketing efforts.<sup>43</sup>

Under the title ‘Christianity for Sale’, Wells quoted Church Marketing Solutions definition of the term:

The process of communicating the features and benefits of the church’s product (relationships) in a compelling manner that helps people take their next step in pursuing the church’s product (relationships).<sup>44</sup>

Kenneth F.W.Prior had spotted all this years ago. Publishing in 1975, he wrote:

Commercial advertising is full of it. A brand of tobacco is ‘cool and refreshing’; a certain drink is ‘satisfying’; other products such as make-up, toothpaste and deodorants give ‘confidence’; while others offer what promises to be ‘exhilarating’ or ‘exciting’.

He issued a warning, albeit too gently:

In this context, then, we must be careful not to over-emphasise the subjective results of being a Christian, such as the joy and peace we may look for, if we wish to avoid giving the impression that Christianity is just a piece of good

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.churchnetusa.com/services/marketing-solutions>

<sup>44</sup> Wells p23.

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psychology. After all, what matters most of all is the fact of sins forgiven, more than any feelings that result from it.<sup>45</sup>

This wants quoting avoiding negatives and stressing positives:

In this context, then, we must be careful to emphasise the objective results of being a Christian... if we wish to avoid giving the impression that Christianity is just a piece of good psychology. After all, what matters most of all is the fact of sins forgiven, more than any feelings that result from it.

Wells spoke of how the marketers see things:

The sense [among marketers is] that things are stagnating in the evangelical world, and the way of 'doing' church in the past won't work with the newer generations. That being so, churches must change their way of doing business or face extinction.

This thought of a market is of course at the heart of the new approach. *It is borrowed from the business world.*

Over the last three [now four] decades, a consensus has emerged among the market-defined, market-driven, and seeker-sensitive that the 'traditional' church is like a product now rendered obsolete by the passage of time and the onrush of innovation. Traditional churches are thinking in terms of [offering] few choices and few products – and the products are those they have always offered...

The circumstance of the market is that no one stays in business without taking account of their customers. Traditional churches... are disregarding their consumers if they stay the course [that is, if they manage to survive! – DG]. That is now a common assumption. Customers, after all, are sovereign. They will take their business elsewhere if the businesses do not adjust to their interests and desires. This is as true in the church as it is in the mall. The church, then, plainly must rethink itself. Indeed, it needs to reinvent itself.

What happens in the corporate world has not been lost on many of our church leaders today, especially those who are

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<sup>45</sup> Kenneth F.W.Prior: *The Gospel in a Pagan Society: The relevance for today of Paul's ministry in Athens*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1975, pp57-58.



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American.<sup>46</sup> Increasingly, they are thinking like corporate CEOs<sup>47</sup> who pursue market share<sup>48</sup> and market domination with a kind of cold, calculating, ruthless and steely zeal.

Pastors, as a consequence, are now receiving invitation upon invitation from experts offering them help in getting up to business speed. In 2000 for example, pastors were invited to ‘an innovative, one-of-a-kind’ conference experience. The fact that it had been held the previous year does take the bloom off the ‘one-of-a-kind’ bit, but never mind. Here, pastors would be motivated by ‘Disney-proven approaches’. More than that, they would learn ‘strategies and tactics’ used at Disney World to ensure ‘customer loyalty’.<sup>49</sup>

Here is one UK effort at coming up with the goods. It is taken from the FIEC webpage:

Ray Evans is an experienced FIEC pastor who knows what it takes to lead a church through the different stages of growth. So we’re delighted to announce that he’s joining our Directors’ Team in April [2017] to offer his expertise to the leaders of our churches.

Wells:

The internal architecture of the evangelical church began to change when pastors flocked to join the Hybels business experiment... The method is one learned from the corporate world, and, however inadvertently, it is hostile to theology.<sup>50</sup>

Again:

Marketing churches ‘are sports arenas, country clubs and corporate headquarters all rolled into one’.<sup>51</sup>

Under ‘Catering to [for] the Customer’, Wells declared:

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<sup>46</sup> Now it has appeared in the UK. This is why I am writing.

<sup>47</sup> Chief Executive Officers – those who take management decisions.

<sup>48</sup> That is, they want to increase their share of the total market; in other words, maximise sales and, above all, profit.

<sup>49</sup> Wells pp25-26, emphasis mine.

<sup>50</sup> Wells p27.

<sup>51</sup> Wells p28.

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If we are going to market the church and its gospel, where are we going to start? We start, of course, with our customer. What does the customer want?

The conventional wisdom is that seriousness is the death knell of successful churches. In an age of entertainment, such as our age in the West, we have to be funny, engaging, likeable and light to succeed. So, seriousness must be banished. Preserve the taste, but cut the calories!

That is the recipe seeker-sensitive strategists and pastors are following. It is their response to their perception of this changing public...

Regular Christianity, many now think, does not go down easy and smooth; Christianity Lite does. A church that is serious, that is still regular... well, what can one say? It will stand out like an organ stop, if that still makes sense now the organs are becoming as rare as dodo birds. And how better to signal the change than by replacing the old-fashioned sermon with a personal chat from a barstool, or by replacing the serious discourse from the pastor with a drama whose very format carries with it a sense of entertainment?

There really is no end to the innovations that are possible as churches think of different ways to attract and accommodate consumers.<sup>52</sup>

Marketers know that they must offer different styles for different groups; they must provide a menu. Customer choice is key:

One of the ways of making the experience of going to church more pleasant is to offer choice. Consumers want to be able to choose the style of music they hear, the kind of worship they participate in, and to have a say in what they hear from the barstool up front..

Customers can choose between different themes in worship, or different activities, or different styles in different parts of the building. It is much more like a self-selection, self-service<sup>53</sup> than a set meal. That way people can choose which aspect of worship suits them best on that particular day. If all they want to do is pray, then let them pray in a room in the

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<sup>52</sup> Wells pp28-29.

<sup>53</sup> Wells had 'buffet'.

### *Appendix 3: Wells*

building. If they want to watch a video, let them watch a video.<sup>54</sup>

The ambience is very important, too. Buildings, décor, and the like, all need very careful attention to detail. Wells:

Our customers, we also need to understand, are ill at ease in religious buildings. They do not want to be preached at, and find hearing of their sin quite dismal; they do not want to sing boring music, and don't understand the old hymns anyway. They come to be inspired and uplifted, and are fish out of water unless they can mingle freely, coffee in hand; they feel most natural in an environment that bears more than a passing resemblance to the late-night comedy shows. If they are out of the old church groove – or were never in it – they are now into the relational group [Relationship Evangelism – DG]. They want to connect.<sup>55</sup>

In passing, I note that 'connect' is a big word, a big idea, for Evans. But 'connection' doesn't just happen; it has to be organised. And Evans is fully awake to the necessity. For example, under the title: 'Re-engineering midweek meetings', he writes:

Encouraging new people at a Sunday meeting to participate in a small home-group is a key aspect of retaining them. A larger church will need to think carefully about how it scripts the pathway from Sunday to home-group, making signposts clear and the journey easy. Otherwise, as we've seen, people will get lost. We have a saying: 'If new people don't connect to the small as well as the large, it is only a matter of time before they leave the large'. The combination of belonging to both has proven to be a great setting in which to foster healthy discipleship.<sup>56</sup>

To let Wells continue: as for the fabric, this must be of the highest quality on offer:

And the amenities? What began as a simple recognition by church marketers that parking should be convenient, signs

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<sup>54</sup> Wells pp29-30.

<sup>55</sup> Wells p30.

<sup>56</sup> Evans pp121-122.

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evident, and bathrooms clean, somehow began a migration. In many churches this meant that what was once merely acceptable had to become first-rate instead, like stepping into a five-star hotel. Four Seasons Community Church! So it has happened all over the American church world<sup>57</sup> at the cost of millions and millions of dollars.<sup>58</sup>

Wells recognised the need people have for relationships:

The yearning for relationships, into which these churches are trying to tap, is undoubtedly real.<sup>59</sup>

True. But above all, of course, sinners need to be converted.

Under ‘Wal-Mart<sup>60</sup> Churches’, Wells wrote:

Like customers everywhere, those who show up in these churches are sovereign. Let us make no mistake about that. They rule. Accepting this fact has become the key to becoming cutting-edge in cultural terms. A tract or advertising flyer<sup>61</sup> from a church in Mesa, Arizona, in 2006 for example, read: ‘Is your life everything you want it to be? You hear all kinds of offers of ways to improve your life, but do they work? God is offering you a way to make your life everything you truly want it to be’. So, there it is! The difference between this offer and the others is that this one works. Here the customer can match self-perceived need with a product. And bingo! Success!

With this kind of thinking in the air, we in the church today are wary<sup>62</sup> of speaking of the Christian faith that is too demanding because of the prospect of offending our market(s). We take care not to cross these lines when speaking from our barstools.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> And is now being promoted in the UK. As before, this is why I am writing.

<sup>58</sup> Wells p30.

<sup>59</sup> Wells p31.

<sup>60</sup> A massive American company owning hypermarkets, chain stores, discounters, and so on.

<sup>61</sup> Wells had ‘mailer’.

<sup>62</sup> Wells had ‘leery’.

<sup>63</sup> Wells pp36-37.

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But marketers need to keep up to speed, keeping a weather eye open as they do:

The moment disaffection with the church's music, message, style, ethos, amenities, programmes, or parking lot(s) begins to take root in a congregation, these new market-savvy pastors fear, they can anticipate our glances directed toward the front of the church signalling consumer dissatisfaction. The glances will then mature into displeasure, the displeasure will become a seed, the seed will germinate in the internal soil that is ready to receive it, and the decision to walk away will be made. That is the (post)modern version of damnation, at least from a pastor's point of view!

Market-savvy pastors, sensing this, back off. They ease or lower demands<sup>64</sup> and expectations, making Christianity light and easy. They hire new staff who specialise in knowing how to make worship fun, not to mention funny. Polls and soundings are taken each week, just as they are by the major retailers, to see if things are 'on target'.<sup>65</sup>

What about the pragmatic argument? Wells:

What is happening here is that the individual has invested his or her desires with a kind of sovereign authority that runs roughshod over everything else, including the word of God. Never mind. Is it not better to have these people in the church on their own terms than not at all? Is it not possible that they will hear something there that might 'click' with them? Why offend them, then, and guarantee that their weekends will be spent away from church? So, make it all as simple as an advertisement, as pleasing as an ice cream in the heat of summer. Make it as easy on the mind as a relaxing show on television. Only give [them] something that works. Do not talk doctrine. Do not hold forth about anything that takes a serious effort to follow. Do not sound churchy.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, marketers, for all their outward confidence, are inwardly nervous. They know something is amiss. As Wells, under 'Down with the Traditional Church!', put it:

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<sup>64</sup> Wells had 'lift demands'. He meant 'remove', not 'raise', them.

<sup>65</sup> Wells pp38-39.

<sup>66</sup> Wells p39.

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This new direction is, needless to say, carried on side-by-side with an attack on the traditional churches. This attack has become incessant from the church marketers... And it is, at first glance,<sup>67</sup> quite curious.

It is true that some traditional churches are desultory, dispirited, boring, dull, lifeless, inept, small, disheartened or otherwise dying... But if the traditional church is so inept, so out-of-it, so not-with-it, so *passé*, so completely washed up, so painful, and so boring, why not let it die peacefully? Why keep on kicking it?

*Because the real target is not the traditional church but the traditional theology it lives by.* This belief system is at the heart of the traditional churches' life that seeker-sensitives are after. It is not that they want to deny it or reject it, but it is something of an embarrassment to them. At least in their own churches, they want to conceal it. They want it hidden, kept in the background, made to disappear from what they are doing. It is rather like a family secret. Family secrets are true, but they should be kept private. They should not be divulged.<sup>68</sup>

Of course it is only to be commended that marketers want to reach sinners (if that is what they still call them). Under 'A Word of Praise', Wells admitted:

Like so many matters in life, however, there are two sides to this story. The other side is that many who have taken up the tools of marketing have done so out of desires that could be laudable. The first of these is a desire to see Christian faith, which is apparently flagging, begin to grow again. The second is to engage post-modern culture.<sup>69</sup>

Just a word on the first of these two desires – 'to see Christian faith, which is apparently flagging, begin to grow again'.<sup>70</sup> As

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<sup>67</sup> Wells had 'on its face'.

<sup>68</sup> Wells pp39-40, emphasis mine.

<sup>69</sup> Wells pp41-42.

<sup>70</sup> Earlier, in another place where Wells used this phrase, I introduced the definite article – 'the Christian faith'. I commented: 'I am sure Wells was speaking of "faith" in the objective sense – what it is that is believed. Hence my use of the definite article. But

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it stands, this is capable of a range of meanings, but I guess that Wells was speaking of the marketer's desire to see more people become... become what, exactly? The devil, as always, is in the detail: 'to see Christian faith... begin to grow' is far too vague. How about 'to see sinners converted'? I fear, however, that too often the marketer's desire amounts to little more than an increase in numbers attending church and, in course of time, becoming its adherents by agreeing to certain principles or propositions. Conversion, I hope it does not need saying, is very different to that!

As Wells went on, in 'Engaging Culture', alas, he showed that he himself had not entirely shaken off the Christendom model of church life:

I also applaud the marketer's desire for cultural engagement. That is to put as positive a construction as I possibly can on what they are doing. Yet it is also clear that their desire to engage culture is really a desire to exploit it, to use it for their own advantage. And yet, their desire is not altogether amiss. No one should take issue with a church [for] being sensitive to outsiders. On the contrary, this is simply about being considerate. Every church should put itself in the shoes of an outsider who visits for the first time, who knows nothing about Christian faith,<sup>71</sup> and is introduced to it at this first visit. With what impressions will that person leave? Those [visitors] in this situation do notice whether it is easy to find their way [about]... and whether they are met by friendliness. The effort to meet people on their own turf in this way is entirely laudable.<sup>72</sup>

Wells spoke of the dilemma in which this placed him:

However, despite these two main virtues, so much of this rethinking of the church, this effort at finding new ways to 'do' church, has rested on naïveté so enormous, so breathtakingly unrealistic and untrue, that it puts the rest of the church, who may have noticed what the marketers are up

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subjective faith is not ruled out; that is, "trust". In which case the definite article would not be required'.

<sup>71</sup> See the previous note.

<sup>72</sup> Wells p44.

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to, in quite an awkward position. What do you say to a friend doing embarrassing things in a public place? Do you keep silent and simply hope, for his or her sake, that others will not notice? Or do you risk embarrassing that person by telling him or her that what he or she is doing is not acceptable? I have chosen to tell.<sup>73</sup>

I, too – though I sense the risk I am taking in publishing my response to Evans – know that I cannot sidestep it.

Wells opened his ‘telling’ in this way: ‘The first mistake the church marketers made was refusing to see that what they have been doing had miscarried’.<sup>74</sup> Tracing this out historically, among the mistakes being made by the modern men, Wells noted:

Market-driven pastors and strategists... use the wrong analogy.<sup>75</sup>

So what is the ‘right’ parallel? Wells:

The analogy *du jour*<sup>76</sup> is between the way proficient marketers like Pepsi do their business and how the church should do its business.

There are, in fact, two main parallels that some in the church have seen. *First*, Christ was incarnate... His teaching was contextualised. Our church life, our message, should be, too...

The *second* parallel is between marketing and evangelism. In marketing, much time, effort and expense are spent investigating in exactly which social pockets, which generational habitats, the product will find its most likely consumers. Marketing is built on serious research. Once the target audience has been identified, then the product advertisements are honed to connect with the most likely buyers. What is being sold is a combination of information about the product and promises about its benefits. These promises about the product are trying to connect with the

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<sup>73</sup> Wells p44.

<sup>74</sup> Wells p44.

<sup>75</sup> Wells p50.

<sup>76</sup> Literally, of the day, something, temporary, fleeting that is enjoying great but probably short-lived popularity or publicity.



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consumers' deep yearnings, yearnings to be seen as successful, or important, to be cutting-edge, or enviable. This is a time when we prefer to be envied for what we have rather than admired for who we are. So the sale is clinched. What is bought may be a product, but along with the product is bought a sense about life, a new look, an upgrade, having the latest and best, the appearance of having arrived, success, or being someone... The gospel is a product, evangelism is about selling it, and church (pastoral) staffs are there to make it all happen. In the market-driven churches, this is preceded by market research that identifies the most likely customers... In both forms of marketing – in the world and in the church – the result is an exchange of goods. In one, a new sound system, a new BMW, the latest and most alluring perfume. In the other, eternal life.<sup>77</sup>

Some researchers, I understand, claim that what customers are really looking for when they 'shop till they drop' is not the goods they buy, but their regular fix of dopamine, a neurotransmitter which plays a major role in giving a person a sense of a reward when he or she acts in a certain way. And this applies to a whole range of activities, not excluding the kind of church-attendance experience that the evangelical marketers encourage. This, Wells argued, is the proper parallel for marketers in their efforts to see 'church' thrive. Some have cottoned on and are using it. But, he continued:

So, what is wrong with this? What is wrong if it clearly works? After all, some churches that have marketed themselves and their product – the gospel – have grown rather astoundingly, though those that have failed rarely get noticed. Can we argue with success?<sup>78</sup>

So how did Wells respond? Wells:

Can we argue with success? I believe we can. More than that, I believe, in this case, that we should. What we have here are churches reconfigured around evangelism that abandon much of the fabric of biblical faith [in order] to succeed. They have taken a part of that faith, modified it in deference to

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<sup>77</sup> Wells pp50-51.

<sup>78</sup> Wells p51.

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consumer impulse, and then made of that part all that there is to Christian faith.<sup>79</sup> Here is a methodology for success that can succeed with very little truth; indeed, its success seems to depend on not showing much truth. After all, evangelical churches aren't the only ones walking this road – some liberal mainline churches are trying to do so, too, taking a page out of this playbook. So are some Catholic churches. And in Los Angeles there is a nine-thousand-member Agape International Spiritual Centre, which makes no pretence of being Christian, but has enjoyed great success by emulating the Willow Creek model. It boasts a million friends worldwide, and casts itself in the New Thought – Ancient Wisdom tradition of spirituality, happily melding in its worship the ohmmms [that is, a noise accompanying meditation] of Eastern religion and the praise choruses of Christian churches. Now, that's what you call blended worship!<sup>80</sup>

Wells set out the radical fault with the marketing model:

[The] gospel really parts company from the way in which products and services are marketed in our modernised world. These products and services are nothing more than products and services. They are simply there for our use. The gospel is not!... A methodology for success that circumvents issues of truth is one that will rapidly emancipate itself from biblical Christianity or, to put it differently, will rapidly eviscerate biblical faith.

That, indeed, is what is happening because the marketing model, if followed, empties the truth out of the gospel. First, the needs [which] consumers have are needs they identify for themselves. The need [which] sinners have are needs God identifies for us; and the way we see our needs is rather different from the way he sees them. We suppress the truth about God, holding it down in 'unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18)...<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See earlier note on whether or not this phrase should have the definite article.

<sup>80</sup> Wells pp51-52.

<sup>81</sup> Wells p52.

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I break in to underscore this vital point. Bearing in mind the natural man's hatred of the gospel (see, for instance, Rom. 8:5-8; 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:11-14; 2 Tim. 4:3), it is clear that:

...the gospel cannot be a product that the church sells because there are no consumers for it. When we find consumers, we will find that what they are interested in buying, on their own terms, is not the gospel.<sup>82</sup>

This massive point merits expansion. The natural man who, as the above passages show, finds Christ, the gospel, the cross, foolish, scandalous, hateful, ridiculous... will never – never – be in the market for Christ, the gospel, the cross. There are no customers for Christ. Oh, yes, there is a thronging multitude for the 'Christendom experience', for 'the loaves' (John 6:26), but that and conversion to Christ are poles apart. If this paragraph has not sunk in, please read it again before moving on. Aloud!

Wells continued:

Furthermore, when we buy a product, we buy it for our use. [But] when we accept Christ, he is not there for our use, but we are there for his service. We commit ourselves to him in a way that we do not commit ourselves to any product. There is a world of difference between the Lord of glory, the incarnate second person of the Godhead, and a Lexus,<sup>83</sup> a vacation home, or a trip to the Bahamas. The marketing analogy blurs all of this, reducing Christ simply to a product we buy to satisfy our needs. What is destroyed along the way are the biblical doctrines of sin, of the incarnation and redemption. The marketing analogy is the wrong analogy. It is deeply harmful to the Christian faith. This harm is immediately apparent when we see that it has produced a kind of spirituality that is indistinguishable from the spirituality in the culture. That spirituality is predominantly non-Christian.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Wells p53.

<sup>83</sup> That is, a powerful, luxury car.

<sup>84</sup> Wells p53

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Oh yes, the world's culture never lacks 'spirituality'. Witness Israel. Time and again, Israel threw off the LORD, but they never left a vacuum. The people always adopted other gods. Indeed, they even mixed the two in the temple! See for instance, 2 Kings 16:10-16; 21:4-15. Pagan Babylon, Greece and Rome had no lack of gods and 'spirituality'. The world is supercharged with 'spirituality' today. Include 'spirituality' in a title, and the book stands a good chance of selling.<sup>85</sup> The devil sees to all this. He knows that 'spirituality' and 'religion' can keep sinners from Christ. This is what Christendom is all about. Church marketers need to keep it in mind. 'Churchifying' the 'unchurched' is not the same as seeing sinners converted to Christ!

To let Wells continue. It is even worse. Marketers are not only using a non-Christian model; they are actually working against the gospel:

This cultural spirituality... is hostile to the Christian faith. [The] Christian faith is about revealed truth, doctrine that is to be believed, moral norms that should be followed, and church life in which participation is expected. Our cultural spirituality wants none of this.

But this has not stopped many... from trolling in these waters because of the marketing model. The success they achieve is to be had by being 'religious' as little as possible. Religious words have, as a result, more or less disappeared in these churches, words like 'justification', 'atonement', 'judgment', 'holiness', 'incarnation', 'sanctification' and 'glorification'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> These things have a fashion, of course. My wife, who was a manager of a Bible shop in the 80s, told me at the time that they could sell any book with 'Holy Spirit' in the title.

<sup>86</sup> I checked Evans' book for his use of the words in question: 'justification' (2), 'atonement' (0), 'judgment' (1, for Israel), 'holiness' (1, but not personal; rather, for the reputation of the church when 'integrity' would have been the better word), 'incarnation' (0), 'sanctification' (2), one of which is hardly resounding: 'Many preachers make a mistake here. They preach evangelistically to see people converted and then edifyingly to see believers grow in what theologians call sanctification' (Evans

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If the words have gone, so too have the doctrines of which the words were a part, and by which the doctrines were taught. It is the benefits of believing that can be marketed, not the truth from which the benefits derive. So, market the one and forget the other! Here is the pragmatism that has been a hallmark of American evangelicalism.<sup>87</sup> Here is an anti-doctrinal mood that cannot be squared with the biblical mindset.<sup>88</sup>

If this is the case, how is it that marketers have made such progress, and influenced as many as they have? Because it ‘works’:

What pastors and strategists have seen here, though, is something that is going to work. They thought they could sell spirituality. They apparently also thought that what makes the spirituality distinctively Christian is initially unimportant. It can be picked up later by osmosis once a person is in the church. This seems to be the best explanation of the fact that in these churches are many who say they are born again, but who have no biblical worldview, whose views are a motley selection of what they have picked up along life’s way, some biblical, but many not.<sup>89</sup>

Precisely. Get them into the church, get them into the habit of attending, get them enjoying the experience, after which, it is hoped they will become ‘committed’. When they are safely on board, then, perhaps, they can be introduced to the ‘difficult bits’. But only then. And even then, it will need consummate tact, polished diplomacy, to pull it off without scaring the customers. The marketers must never forget the golden rule: Never Frighten The Customers!<sup>90</sup>

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pp104-105), and, finally, ‘glorification’ (0). Even though publishing well in advance of Evans, Wells has hit the bull’s eye!

<sup>87</sup> And this is what we are going to get in the UK, if it has not already arrived. This is why I write.

<sup>88</sup> Wells pp53-54.

<sup>89</sup> Wells p54.

<sup>90</sup> See the chapter ‘Paul at the Areopagus: The Antithesis of Relationship Evangelism’ for the way in which this applies to Evans, especially with regard to Matt. 7:13-14 and Eph. 5:11.

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Wells spoke of:

The marketing strategy that assumes that the benefits of believing are what people are after, not the belief itself – as if one could have the one without the other! But never mind, this is what makes the sale.<sup>91</sup>

Good intentions are not enough:

The desire of marketers... to engage the culture is commendable. Engaging it, though, is not the same thing as capitulating to it.<sup>92</sup>

Precisely!

Wells came to his conclusion:

There are two families of spirituality in life... One is Christian and the other is pagan... The church... is courted in every age by the alternative, counterfeit spirituality, first in one form and then in another. Today the evangelical church is in a life-and-death struggle with this spiritual alternative... This pagan spirituality comes... in the innocent tones of popular culture. We meet it everywhere.

Sometimes it is dressed up in a sophisticated psychological language. More commonly we hear it in the everyday self-talk of our therapeutic culture. It is there in the television chatter, in the magazines near the checkout counter at the supermarket, and it is mentioned between neighbours. This understanding of being spiritual sounds plausible, compelling, innocent and even commendable, but, let us make no mistake about it, it is *lethal* to biblical Christianity. That is why the biggest enigma we face today is the fact that its chief enablers are evangelical churches, especially those who are seeker-centred and emergent who, for different reasons, are selling spirituality disconnected from biblical truth.

The seeker-sensitive are adapting their product to a spiritual market that believes it can have spiritual comfort with very little truth. The emergents are adapting their product to a

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<sup>91</sup> Wells p57.

<sup>92</sup> Wells p92.

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spiritual market that is younger, post-modern, and suspicious of truth.<sup>93</sup>

But in both cases we see this strange anomaly: here are those who think of themselves as being biblical, as being the children of the New Testament, the followers of Jesus and the apostles, embracing an alternative spirituality in order either to be successful or to be culturally cutting-edge.<sup>94</sup>

We must never forget that:

...it was Christ, with all his painful demands of obedience, not comfortable country clubs, that early Christianity was about. What God had done in space and time when the world was stood on its head was Christianity's preoccupation, not the multiplication of programmes, strobe lights,<sup>95</sup> and slick drama. Images we may want, entertainment we may desire, but it is the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen that is the church's truth to tell.<sup>96</sup>

As Wells rightly observed:

These issues go to the heart of evangelical faith. Indeed, they go to the heart of the question whether [the] evangelical faith is going to survive in the West. I began, when I first raised this question, by suggesting that evangelicalism had two flaws that have been there from the beginning in its post-World War II phase.

The *first* flaw is that evangelicalism has an inclination to allow its biblical core to shrink. In parts of the evangelical world today, it has shrunk so much that virtually nothing remains. This was so initially because evangelicalism has been a populist movement that owes much of its temper to democratic impulses. When it also became a marketing phenomenon, further emptying-out happened.

*Second*, and alongside this, evangelicalism's inherently *para* nature asserted itself so that it increasingly became parachurch to the point where the local church, in biblical terms [that is, the *ekklesia*], became increasingly irrelevant.

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<sup>93</sup> Wells had 'leery about truth'.

<sup>94</sup> Wells pp176,178, emphasis his.

<sup>95</sup> Naturally, the early church did not have access to 'strobe lights', but they had the equivalent which they signally had no need of.

<sup>96</sup> Wells p207.

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Once these things began to happen, I believe, evangelicalism was on its way to decline.<sup>97</sup>

Just so. ‘Community’ has replaced *ekklēsia*.

The way forward? Wells:

Letting God be God over his church, seeing him as its centre and glory, its source and its life, is a truly liberating experience. It liberates us from thinking that we have to do, in ourselves, what we are entirely incapable of doing. That is, making the church grow.<sup>98</sup> We cannot do the work that only God can do. We can work in the church, preach and teach, spread the gospel, encourage and urge each other on, but we cannot impart new life. Nor can we ever sanctify the church. Indeed, we cannot even feed the church. It is God who supplies the food; we are simply called upon to serve it (1 Cor. 3:5). This, however, is precisely why Paul says... that ‘we do not lose heart’ (2 Cor. 4:1,16), but are ‘confident’ (2 Cor. 3:4; cf. 2 Cor. 5:6).<sup>99</sup>

But, as Wells asserted:

While all of this is conventional enough, it is not common enough in evangelical churches. Lip service is paid to these ideas, but when we get really serious about ‘doing church’ we turn to what we know best. We turn to structures and programmes, appearances and management, advertising and marketing. Our preoccupation is with what we *do* and therefore with what we *control*. This is what animates the conversation among evangelical leaders, what fills the pages of magazines..., and what attracts pastors to the really big, important conferences. This is what they are willing to pay serious money to hear.<sup>100</sup>

As Wells went on to say:

Alas! It is missing the point, if I may say so. What is our primary interest in a technological world [that is, this age – DG] is technique, for that, after all, is how we manage

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<sup>97</sup> Wells p210.

<sup>98</sup> Wells had ‘growing the church’.

<sup>99</sup> Wells p247.

<sup>100</sup> Wells p247.



### *Appendix 3: Wells*

everything else. In the kingdom of God, [however], things are different.<sup>101</sup> It is not that we do not do things, but that our doing is [to be] rooted in our believing. [I would add that this means our doing must be rooted in Scripture – DG]. Who we *are* is more fundamental than what we *do*. Character is more basic than action. Being mastered by God is infinitely more important than having the know-how to manage the church. Letting God be God over the church means that he becomes foundational to its being, thinking and doing. In a highly pragmatic culture, [however],... doing cuts itself off from thinking. The only thinking that gets done, at least with respect to the church, is about the how-to questions. The kind of critical thinking, the serious evaluation that should go along with all of this, is impatiently brushed aside as irrelevant. If something works, if it is successful, that means that what was done has validated itself. What more needs to be thought about?<sup>102</sup>

Finally:

Churches... need to be communities that love the truth God has revealed and, in so doing, become serious and joyous about the God of that truth, and intent upon serving him in his world. The church is not a business, not an experiment, not a product to be sold. It is an outpost of the kingdom, a sign of things to come in Christ's sovereign rule, which is now hidden but will be made open and public. Then all the world will bow before him in recognition of who he is. And this, I dare [to] say, is the only answer we have for the church's existence and service. It is the anticipation of that great day. It is pointing beyond itself to that great day. It lives in this world, but it lives because it has seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. This is the knowledge that changes everything. Business savvy, organisational wizardry, cultural relevance are simply no substitute for this. Unless the Lord rebuilds the evangelical church today, as we humble ourselves before him and hear afresh his word, it will not be rebuilt.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> As the Bible is not like any other book, the church is not like any other body. The Bible and the church must not be treated as though they are just another entity in a world of entities.

<sup>102</sup> Wells p247.

<sup>103</sup> Wells p248.

*Appendix 3: Wells*

Now you can see why I wanted to quote Wells so fully. His words need – demand – careful thought. And, above all, action!