

IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

The Fear-Driven Church

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What drives the economy of a society where the basic daily needs of the majority of its members are met? How does one sell goods and services when what people need to survive is not expensive nor difficult to get?

Like a rousing game of the SIMS, our person begins to seek items that bring comfort and greater return on time, blurring the lines between "need" and "want."

For those selling goods the task becomes more challenging. When basic needs are met, how do we create demand? How is "need" generated when people have the essentials for living life? Present-day America is the result of the answers to these questions.

While there are a handful of ways to manufacture a sense of need, "fear" is one of the more economical, surefire ways to do so.

If your product can help alleviate a fear, then there's a good chance you'll succeed in the marketplace. In the last several years it seems fear has become a way to sell everything from clothing (the fear of looking unfashionable), politics (the fear that _____ will happen!), to the news channels (the fear that other news is biased).

Fear marketing has created what many sociologists call a "culture of fear." I believe the nesting phenomenon (staying at home more often than going out) in post-9/11 America has accelerated this culture of fear because we're relying more on mass media for information and, as a result, are having fewer meaningful conversations with diverse people.

Our minds have a hard time interpreting the focused, oversimplified information that we receive from national marketing campaigns and 24-7 news coverage and putting them all proper context.

For example: the sense that child kidnappings have increased over the last several years, making it more dangerous for children to play in their communities. While crime statistics show that child kidnappings are *decreasing* in number, our access to information on sex offenders, increased news coverage of missing children, Amber alerts, and school “stranger danger” programs mean more to us than the facts. The most recent comprehensive study of child kidnappings shows that only two percent of missing children are kidnapped by non-family members—and of that two percent, more than half are abducted by those with long-term relationship with the families.¹ It seems we don’t know how to properly put into perspective the cherry-picked news we receive.

Worse, it seems this culture of fear is more prevalent in the Christian community. Former president Richard Nixon once said, “People react to fear, not love—they don’t teach that in Sunday school, but it’s true.” As Christian publishers, radio personalities, and non-profits have ramped up their collective need to capture eyeballs and dollars, it seems we too have become purveyors of the culture of fear.

As the marketing director for a major Christian organization once told me, “We sell what they buy, and they buy what we sell”—or, it’s difficult to determine who shapes whom.

Consider the following issues that surfaced lately. (Note: while some of these issues have received some mass-media attention, they’ve become acutely pronounced issues in the church.)

- * MySpace and teenagers, the dangers of the Internet. (Is the Internet dangerous? Could be...but no more than the rest of the world.)
- * Homosexual agendas. (We fear they will find “that gene,” and then what will we do?)
- * Homeschooling. (Too many fears motivating this phenomenon to list in one article.)
- * Halloween. (This used to be a huge outreach opportunity when I was growing up; now kids just dress up like Noah’s Ark animals...yawn.)
- * Y2K. (Uh, nothing happened, but I had to mention it because of the number of intelligent Christian leaders I know who bought caves, underground bunkers, generators, and converted their currency to gold.)
- * Christian persecution in America. (Christians presently have mainstream presence and acceptance.)

¹ Sedlak, A., Finkelhor, D., Hammer, H. & Schultz D. (2002, October).

The aforementioned list is by no means complete, and I don't want you to think these issues aren't worthy of wise contemplation and response, but we've gotten a little crazy with some of our perceptions—not because there aren't valid issues to be considered, but because they have been improperly motivated by fear.

While the marketing of fear can, in the short term, perk up a fundraising campaign, lock in a few attention spans, and move a few products, the long-term consequences of motivating people through fear are quite negative.

1. A Motivation to Preserve Rather Than Progress

When fear is the dominant factor in culture, there's a tendency to cling to outmoded ways of living and thinking. Change itself is feared. So like someone canning vegetables, we cut the produce from its source of life and vacuum-seal it so it can be saved for uncertain times. Except the act of preservation changes the vitality of the produce, its taste, and its texture. Even though much of its substance is intact, the dominant form of contemporary American Christianity feels stale, tasteless, and less vibrant.

2. Oversimplification of Complex Issues and Overemphasis of Non-Issues

The cultivation of fear typically sparks impulsive reactions to complex situations. Rather than detailed, thoughtful reasoning and contemplation of matters, immediate sound bites are generated to achieve a marketable result (e.g., pledging a donation, not changing the channel, buying a product) rather than truly informing the public.

As if publishing daily papers isn't challenging enough, news organizations seek to keep the news on television, live, 24/7. And through this commercialized competition, the news is less and less about what's newsworthy, no longer a public service. Rather news has become a commodity, and as a result, increasing revenue trumps news gathering and dissemination—and non-newsworthy and sensationalized topics are overemphasized.

In time those encultured to this lifestyle and culture of fear won't be able to discern between that which is important and unimportant—and even if they could, they wouldn't be able to think contemplatively and reasonably about the issues.

3. Boredom, Despair, and Overzealousness

The most tragic result is that some members of our culture of fear react in extreme ways. Either they opt out of society because of boredom or despair, or they become hyper-reactive in destructive ways. Experts have concluded that the culture of fear has led to violence in schools and the rise of medicated teenagers, as well as ineffectual teenage activism.

This may also be the reason so many teenagers leave the church once they graduate from high school. And the very way we as youth workers present this problem (it kind of plays to the fear theme) could impact the solution.

What We Can Do

Scripture is clear that followers of Christ are no longer slaves to fear; Christ's death has set us free from fear. What's more, we are now the children of God, joint heirs with Christ. This should not result in a feeling of displacement within the world or fear of its systems, but one of calm, sober authority.

When Jesus lived among humanity, he knew he was in his Father's world and that humanity was subject to God. Therefore everything in the world belonged to Jesus. This led to humble, secure interactions with others.

I'm reminded of the hymn, "This Is My Father's World." I miss singing that in church. It was a reminder to a congregation of believers of their ownership—that we live in God's world, that we needn't fear, that God can meet all our needs, that no threat to God's Kingdom is a cause for alarm.

My responsibility is simply to seek God's Kingdom and righteousness. To share with others that the Christ has made the payment for sin so that it no longer has mastery over us. I need not be anxious of anything, because God cares for me.

I guess the question is: Will that message sell? It may be more difficult to market, but in the long run I believe it will counter the culture of fear.