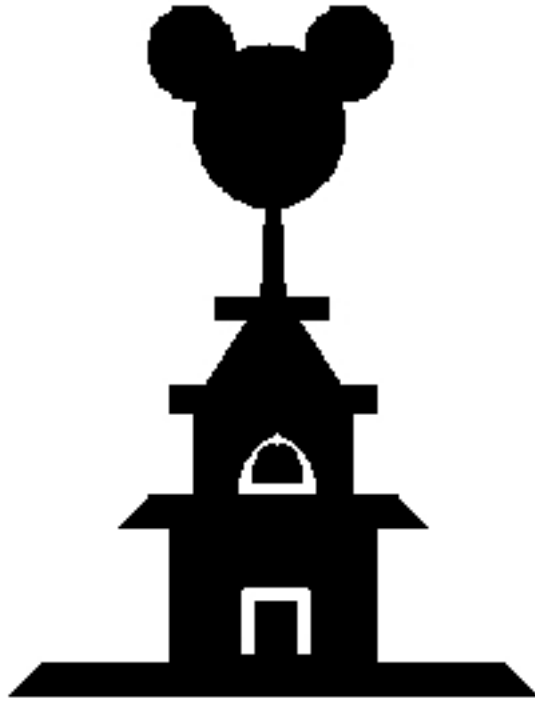


Megachurches: How the Individual's Search for Meaning  
Led to the Disneyfication of the Church



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The coliseum sported the latest in audio and lighting technology. Onstage, performers kept us entertained for an hour while the several thousand people in attendance clapped, cheered, and laughed through the entire presentation. Video cameras caught all of the action on stage as well as the reactions from the crowds. Kiosks and booths in the lobby sold wares from different musicians and comedians, while boasting upcoming events. I was not at a rock concert. I was in church – a megachurch.

Megachurches have become quite a cultural phenomenon over the past two decades. These giants sport several thousand members, millions of dollars in annual budgets, and can exert their influence in both religious and political spheres. They are Christian, conservative, and are a product of American culture. Found in every major city throughout the United States, these churches usually maintain a membership of at least two thousand (Eiesland 193). They are widely recognized by both members and nonmembers for their size. The Belleview Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, for example, has its own interstate exit ramp. It boasts a membership of over 20,000 people

and six basketball courts within its Family Life Center to accommodate every one of them. It is also criticized for its worship services. Growing up in Memphis, I have heard more than one person refer to the church as Six Flags Over Jesus.

While some megachurches started in the mid to late 1800s and grew steadily to their current size, other churches were planted by ministers with the sole goal of becoming behemoths. Rick Warren, senior pastor and founder of the Saddleback Church in southern California told his freshly formed congregation in 1980 that he envisioned an organization with 20,000 members located on 50 acres of land (Stafford 45). Currently, Saddleback has fifteen thousand. Those pastors with visions of starting large churches usually begin by finding an unchurched area and then canvassing neighborhoods and conducting surveys to find what people want in a church. Then, they supply a church that fulfills those needs. Megachurches have few, if any, religious symbols, employ contemporary music styles, and carry weak denominational affiliations (Stafford 44 and Eiesland 193).

Megachurches have much to offer in a seemingly nonreligious way to its members. One youth minister said that his church offered, “Variety . . . I think people come here and are more likely to find somebody that’s like them in a place this huge. Churches now offer counseling services for failing marriages, recovering drug addicts, and pregnant teenagers. They have support groups for anger management and lost loved ones. Youth programs give teenagers a chance to meet others in a God-centered environment. And one church even boasts singles functions (Balmer, *Mine Eyes* video).

Who attends these services? Regular people who are seeking spiritual meaning in their lives make up the congregation. They want that meaning so bad that they are willing to follow whoever will give it to them. Most are Baby Boomers and their children. The

Boomers returned to church almost out of an apology for earlier materialism. “They focused largely on their own individual wants and needs. They were borned [*sic*] to be pleased, not to be saved” (Roof 113). Roof continues:

Beginning with the post-World War II United States, personal identifications came to be linked more to lifestyles and consumption, and less to an economic ethic that had long been undergirded by religious values. This reversal in historic influences, giving greater autonomy to the cultural sphere, set in motion a proliferation of popular cultural forms, less and less bounded by the social locations in which they originated, and gave rise to a whole new set of industries – the “cultural industries.” (49)

Unfortunately, if that search for meaning only so goes far – if a person is a spiritual baby left only to suck on the theological pacifier forever – then the church has failed in its primary role to help people grow spiritually.

The economics of church seem to be governed by the economics of the secular world. Sociologist Melissa Wilde has suggested that by applying supply-side theory, an increase in institutional effort would bring about an increase in religious participation (235). She claims there are five variables to marketing: structure, sales representatives, the product, marketing technique, and the target population (236). We will see these areas in depth later.

This thesis asserts that in accommodating to their many members megachurches have lost their theology. Absence of theology signifies a weakness such that when it comes to intellectual thinking, most members of the megachurch will be unable to provide meaningful insight into the actions of their Lord. As the title alludes, Disneyfication means the weakening of the church to the point that attending services is meant more for entertainment than for spiritual growth. The media minister at the Sun-Belt Baptist Church said, “There is always the challenge of where to draw the line of being open and

accepting of all people and adhering to our standards of what we believe is right and wrong with respect to the Bible.” Theologian Richard Niebuhr wrote a book entitled *Christ and Culture* in which he writes that Christians cannot reject culture, yet cannot claim Jesus to be the Christ of culture, either (70 and 115). Similarly, it is a fine line that megachurches in particular must thread to bring in new members. In this thesis I will demonstrate that by mixing the mechanisms of surrounding culture with their religion, megachurches have crossed that line.

## 1.1 Autobiography

Although I have no plans to go into the ministry, megachurches have become a fascination of mine ever since I was a youngster. My father is Southern Baptist minister. And because of his profession, it could be assured that I would be in church every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. If ever the church doors were open, I was there. Comedian Mark Lowry – the son of a deacon – said it best when he noted, “If the pastor was going to wash the windows on Thursday, we would fill our pews and watch” (Lowry).

My dad never had a megachurch. We served in various small country churches throughout Kentucky, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Florida. Whenever I talked to my friends about attending church, they usually replied that they went to the nearby megachurch. When I questioned them on matters of theology, they often were at a loss for substantial answers. I always wondered what the point of going to church was if members never got anything out of it. I worried for their souls - how could they be saved without knowing

about God? Do not get me wrong, I wanted to attend as well – even if only to be around my friends.

On rare occasions I had chances to visit megachurches and see the numerous attractions – the times when supply-side theory worked its magic. I have seen churches with bowling alleys, recreation facilities, even basketball teams. What did *any* of this have to do with God? Not much I thought at the time. I became angry with what I saw as the blatant commercialization of religion. I noticed that the most popular Christian products were nothing more than imitations of successful secular products. I attended the Christian Booksellers Association’s meeting and noticed the capitalist influences on the CBA. Just as many of CBA’s participants are turned off by the commercialism, I was disgusted with what was happening(Balmer, *Mine Eyes* book 168). Unfortunately, it is difficult to change a system that provides an income.

This thesis is more than just an investigation at the library into the various sociological theories of church growth. Instead, it is a chance to come to grips with many of the frustrations I had during childhood and adolescence. As part of my rebellion against the spiritual marketplace, I decided to stop attending church when I turned fifteen.<sup>1</sup> Attending SBBC has been the first time I have gone to church since coming to college, with exception of making a few appearances at my father’s church.

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<sup>1</sup>That, and my parents finally gave in to my demands.

## 1.2 SBBC: A Case Study

To gain a better understanding of megachurches, I attended five services at the Sun-Belt Baptist Church<sup>2</sup>, during the Spring of 2003. I interviewed two of its ministers – a media minister, Pastor Steve, and a youth minister, Pastor Stafford – and three congregants in addition to talking to several people before and after services. I also had the opportunity to interview an interchurch coordinator named Fred.<sup>3</sup>

SBBC is unique in Pastor Stafford's mind because "being in the vacation capital of the world, we truly have a membership that represents that diversity in race and background." Indeed, SBBC offers citizenship and English language classes to foreigners as a service to the community (Birkhead 170). It would seem as if Sun-Belt possesses the traditional characteristics of a megachurch. It has 11,000 members, employs 12 full-time ministers, has an annual budget of 11 million dollars, and sits on a campus of 150 acres. According to church historian Patricia Birkhead, SBBC's sanctuary – called the "worship center" by members – contains two linear miles of pews (187). It offers many of the characteristic megachurch services such as support groups, an elementary and high school, and an upcoming breakfast with golfer Aaron Braddedley.

One aspect of Sun-Belt Baptist that I found surprising was the level of respect for other religions and diversity in general. Dorothy, a clerk in the bookstore who has been a member of Sun-Belt for 22 years, said, "I respect everybody and their religion. I mean, we're trying to do the same thing as far as I'm concerned. I have some very good Catholic friends. I realize if you're raised that way, then by all means it would be hard to change."

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<sup>2</sup>An assumed name for a church in Florida.

<sup>3</sup>An assumed title for the role of a denominational bishop without power.

Indeed, it would seem as if SBBC uses diversity as a way to bring in new members. Pastor Steve notes that the church tries “to be careful of communicating in the Southern Baptist way. We try to be a little more universal in our language.” For example, former Catholics make up the second largest group of people to join Sun-Belt (the largest being people raised Baptist).<sup>4</sup> In an effort to be more sensitive to the Catholic background, SBBC drops titles such as “Sunday School” for “Discipleship training.”

During the summer of 1997, the Southern Baptist Convention officially boycotted Disney because of the corporation’s policy of providing insurance benefits to same-sex partners. During the debate, SBBC led the charge against the boycott in part due to the realization that Christians cannot shun someone due to lifestyle and then expect a conversion.<sup>5</sup> As stated by Pastor Stafford, “We felt as if we could do a better job by being involved in Disney. . . We’re not saying this [promoting homosexuality] is wrong without any hope or support.

Over the course of this thesis, I am going to paint a picture of megachurches which uses Sun-Belt Baptist of Orlando as an example, while considering many of the prevalent theories about the spiritual marketplace from Niebuhr to Weber to Roof. Chapter 2 will examine the history of American revivals and how the individual’s search for meaning led to the creation of megachurches. In chapter 3 we will focus on the relationship of the megachurch to the individual. In chapter 4 we will move outside of the walls of the church

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<sup>4</sup>Given the geographical location of the church, having a large Catholic block make up the membership is not surprising. SBBC is located in a dense Catholic city.

<sup>5</sup>Because SBBC is located in Florida, it is thought that the church may have also opposed the boycott due to the number of members who work at Disney.

to see how megachurches work with culture. Chapter 5 will wrap up the thesis with the conclusion that megachurches are examples of the Disneyfication of the Church.

## Chapter 2

# Bringing in the Members (Starting Out)

Comedian Jon Katz once gave his version of what priests giving Catholic mass sound like. In a high-pitched, nasal voice he exclaimed, “Oh Lord. Lord, Lord, Lord. You are ten pounds of holy in a five pound bag, Lord.” He offered his own suggestion as to boosting church attendance. Ministers should promote radio announcements akin to those given for monster truck rallies. “Sunday! Sunday! Sunday! See what happens when the Holy of the Holiest faces the Thunder from Down Under!”

Ever since conversion by the sword became taboo, religious groups have had to deploy innovative techniques to attract new adherents. In recent times, nothing has worked better than the practices used by secular companies. The revivals that swept the United States in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century transformed American religion into a commodity (Cimino 60). By adapting secular advertising techniques, those revivals planted the seeds for what would become today’s spiritual marketplace. Recalling the variables of supply-side theory that were mentioned during the introduction, we can easily see that the product is salvation. In this chapter I will explore some of the techniques that

are used to attract new members by first looking at a brief history of American revivals.

Second, I will focus on the Church's capitalizing on the individual's search for meaning.

Finally, I will look at some people's theories as to how a church could grow so large.

## 2.1 American Revivals

While the marvel of megachurches may be only twenty years old, the phenomenon of attracting large crowds for religious gatherings is older than the American Constitution. During the First Great Awakening, George Whitefield became a pioneer in bringing together the masses for the sake of piety. Historian Frank Lambert noted that Whitefield originally planned to go into trade. After opting to follow a call into the ministry, the minister applied many of his acquired business techniques to revivals (Lambert 36). He put God on display and sold salvation to whomever was willing to listen. Marketing became a tool to spread the Gospel (Lambert 51). Although clergy at the time believed that preaching should be reserved for sanctuaries, Whitefield deemed that bringing salvation to individuals and delivering them from sin must transcend church boundaries and therefore sermons should be given in fields to large groups of people (Lambert 20).

To Methodists conducting revivals, camp meetings presented a level of challenges other than simple preaching. The length of time that a revival persisted plus the amount of people in attendance begged for services beyond the typical Sunday morning church ceremony. Methodists believed that church should provide Christian entertainment. If congregants were bored in God's house, they might turn to worldly venues of entertainment – places that produced lax morals and idleness. To compete with the

secular world, they created Vacation Bible School, held meetings at Martha's Vineyard, and formed the Chautauqua Association (Moore 149).

Critics in the Holiness Movement at the time stated that the recreational attitude of the Methodists pushed spiritual meaning into the background. Indeed, more Americans went to church than paid for entertainment at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Moore 222). Church was the entertainment center. Today's megachurches eventually built their contemporary services upon this entertainment style of worship.

## 2.2 The Search for Meaning

It is a part of human nature that young people should seek meaning in their lives. Every person of every generation has had to come to grips with the question where do I belong? The process of leaving home brings with it the need to differentiate from one's parents. The search for significance can lead some people to take the wrong path if they should neglect using caution when choosing a church. In this section, I will examine how megachurches have used the search for meaning to bring in new members. As author Wade Roof notes, people will listen to whomever boasts the path to meaning:

In times of spiritual awakenings, Americans fall back on their own conscience and solitude, on inner resources. They turn to popular faiths and practices, to popular dramas and cultural narratives giving expression to the individualism extolled in the American imagination. (Roof 88)

Unfortunately, churches have not necessarily been too quick to cater to the needs of young people. A 1998 Gallup poll concluded teenagers find that "most churches and synagogues today are not effective in helping people find meaning in life" (Cimino 64). Accordingly,

churches have come to realize that they cannot merely lead someone to the saving water; they must make him or her drink from it as well. Churches have had to adapt their styles to keep old members as well as bring in new ones. The churches' leaders have had to do the work because the congregants themselves refuse. Congregants simply follow the lead of the ministers.

Despite all the evangelical rhetoric about *sola scriptura* in the twentieth century, most evangelicals don't trust themselves to interpret the Bible, so they turn to others – local pastors, mendicant preachers and lecturers, authors of thousands of books, commentaries, and reference tools – for interpretive schemes. (Balmer, *Mine Eyes* book 156)

Likewise, “people adopt a particular belief or ritual practice precisely because it offers something to hold on to, without the need to fashion an integrated, or fully coherent view of oneself or religion” (Roof 138). Under Melissa Wilde's list of supply-side variables, it would seem as if the target population is that of people seeking spiritual meaning, while the representatives are the clergy and the church at large.

Worship services have been modified to cater to the needs of the people. Gone in some churches are the days of a fire-breathing preacher yelling at people to repent. Instead, churches offer a more contemporary style of music that is meant to attract younger generations.

Music is important not just in its lyrics, but for the ambience it creates where a religious leader can modulate the message to fit the mood, thereby creating an aura of openness and expectancy with regard to spiritual possibilities. . . Even the physical surroundings – often auditoriums and other neutral spaces rather than church sanctuaries, lacking visible religious symbols, and using screens for projecting culturally current lyrics rather than using hymnals – help to sustain an environment of informality, open-mindedness, and searching. (Roof 190)

Sun-Belt Baptist is no different. When asked why the church employs a contemporary service, Pastor Stafford replied that it is “a commitment to reaching this generation of

folks. [The ministers who work in this area] track the trends in worship that are very open and intimate – even though we’re such a huge place. I think people really enjoy that, especially being from different backgrounds. We’ve incorporated a couple of different styles in there that minister to people no matter where they are.” Pastor Steve elaborated, “We realized that if we want to continue to reach the next generation, we are going to have to do things different than the way we are used to. We have to provide music that is relevant to where they are today.” Everything, it would seem, is hinged on drawing people to church – no matter the cost.

Sermons too have been tailored to everyday issues. The times that I have attended SBBC, the senior pastor has used the sermon to speak about debt. Originally, I thought such a subject was best left outside of the church’s doors. Just as I feel that religion and politics should not mix, I felt a sense of being let down by such a theologically weak sermon. Not everyone had the same experience I had. Each of the previously mentioned pastors stated that it is the job of Christians to act as good stewards. Even Fred, whom I expected to take my side, said, “If you obey spiritual principles, you will grow spiritually.” During the middle of every sermon I have witnessed, the pastor paused to let a congregant give a testimony about being in debt. Each story featured hard financial times that could only be resolved by adhering to the biblical principles of money. By placing a face on a corrected problem, pastors can bring about a sense of group ethic.

Megachurches provide much in the way of social interaction in addition to personal salvation. Pastor Stafford claims that “people are able to come here and are more likely to find someone that’s like them in a place this huge.” Fred praised megachurches by saying that people attend because, “[megachurches have a] variety of programs to build their

family. They're looking for some good, quality social interaction." In addition to providing an outlet in which to make friends, megachurches counselling services and offer assistance to its members as well as the community at large.

Although megachurches are out to build membership numbers, it would seem as that goal is not their bottom line. "When all is said and done, the ordinary activity of most American religious groups is to minister to the people already there, to shore up their faith, and to supply them with the strength to live their lives" (Moore 272). Adding to our list of supply-side variables, the marketing technique has taken the form of catering to an individual's wants and needs – both spiritually and socially. As Fred puts it, "Members see it as a menu of religious options. There are programs for everyone. It's a consumer mentality. They want; it's there."

Sermons and music are not the only things to build a church upon. In the next section as well as chapter 3 we will explore in further detail some of the ways that megachurches keep their members coming back through spiritual marketing.

## **2.3 The Baseball Diamond (How the Church Grew)**

"Growth," as defined by the dictionary takes two forms. One is the emotional and spiritual kind of maturity. This was kind that the members spoke of most often. The church had given them the meaning for which they were searching. However, the literal definition of growth is a physical process of becoming larger as time progresses. Sun-Belt Baptist has witnessed both kinds. Over the past two decades under the leadership of its current senior pastor, SBBC has seen more than two thousand people join the rolls. The

church has become so large that a vision committee recommended moving locations from its locked downtown area to its current, more spacious setting. The move was initiated because the old site had become too small to support further joinings. Just like ecology tells us, when an area runs out of resources – space in this case – the population will not continue to grow; and in some cases, it may actually decline – people will leave the church and their spiritual search will end.

Sun-Belt Baptist Church feels that its most important area of service to God is in the area of missions. To Baptists, missions not only means sending people to foreign countries to act as witnesses, but also the act of bringing in new members from within the community. As mentioned in the introduction, SBBC donates nearly two million dollars each year to various mission projects. While it feels the need to witness to nonbelievers in Cuba and South America, the church also does a fantastic job of attracting people within its home city. Each year for Christmas and Easter, tickets are given by members to friends, co-workers, and family members in an effort to bring them to the performances. In recent years, nearly 45,000 people have seen the “Singing Christmas Tree” over the course of two weeks (Birkhead 200). The production for such shows is so extensive that over one thousand church goers participate – from the choir to ushers to makeup artists and ticket-booth workers (Birkhead 159).

Once inside the church, people have a chance to see that not all churches are the same. Megachurches in particular have done away with many of the typical churchy objects found in Catholic cathedrals and even some Protestant settings. Many megachurches have few, if any, religious symbols. The setting for SBBC, for example, looks more like a community college campus than that of a prayer house. With the exception of

a single cross on top of the worship center, I could find no reason to suspect that this area was a religious center. Willow Creek in Chicago does not even sport a cross in its sanctuary/auditorium (Balmer, *Mine Eyes* video).

The inclination to remove religious symbols could be in the spirit of iconoclasm, but I suspect it may be due to a different motive. The reason for my assertion comes from none other than Martin Luther. “Despite defining himself as iconoclastic, Luther placed 21 woodcuts in his 1522 New Testament . . . The Augsburg Confession of 1530 said that images could be used to restrain religious fantasy” (Gilman 34). In essence, removing the religious symbols has been a method to keep from scaring off new attendees. This is not to say that attendees cannot become very devout. Every person I interviewed, whether it be a minister or a congregant, has stated that he/she has grown spiritually since joining the church. “It’s just a great environment for growth,” was repeated throughout my research by various members.

The move was not as easy as I can present here. So many people were opposed to the move – many of them had been members of SBBC for a long time – that over 1,000 people left the congregation (Birkhead 188). This story is an example of the shallowness of faith that many congregants possess. They would rather attend a church simply out of convenience for location. Fortunately, just as the vision committee had predicted that more individuals would join, so true was their calculation that Pastor Steve noted, “We’ve experienced continued growth, albeit very moderate. I think the biggest change since the move has been the ability to expand the number of ministries.”

One particularly successful growth model has been that of the Baseball Diamond used at Saddleback. It follows a simple plan.

The basic idea is that a healthy church must balance [Membership, Maturity, Ministry, Mission, and Magnification], neglecting none. All ministry programs should be organized to serve one of the purposes, with a specific target audience in mind. And different departments must work together, since they expect to “hand off” members as they go around the bases. As Warren often says, “You don’t get credit for people left on base!” (Stafford 46).

This process may sound familiar. What has been Sun-Belt’s secret to success? Two theories have been posed which take sides in a religious versus secular debate. Kevin has stated that obedience to the church is an important factor. When everyone works together, the church can prosper. His wife, Lisa, declared, “it grew because of trying to follow his [God’s] direction. To me, it’s gotten so big because he wanted a church this size in this area.” Fred, echoing somewhat Lisa’s claim, stated that megachurches exist because it is God’s will. He also granted a second, more secular reason which is, “Megachurches have extremely dynamic leadership [aka, salesman]. They usually have quality programs. Those quality programs are available at critical times. They’re in concentrated people centers. I guess that’s an indirect way of saying that they are in the right place at the right time.” So why aren’t all churches megachurches? Fred answers in the reverse saying, “I don’t think it’s God’s will to have every church become a megachurch.”

It is important to note that we should not label small churches as abandoning the will of God just as we cannot paint megachurches as doing a bad thing for the pastor’s delivery of what some might consider a theologically weak sermon. Although we can sit back and claim that megachurches are nothing more than Wal-Mart’s peddling religious wares, we cannot blame the marketing companies. Consumers bought into the hype (Schmidt 9). At the beginning of his ministry, George Whitefield was opposed to advertising his sermons (Lambert 55). He was also largely against entertainment, believing

that it led to idleness and lax morals. In the end, however, he used the instruments employed by entertainers to advance his own goals. “He turned market devices against its own excesses” (Lambert 46). He recognized that the commercialization of religion is an *inevitable* event – not a necessary evil, but a path that all religions must take for survival. Either a church must enter the market willingly, or the market will forcibly incorporate it. The problem is at what point is the tail wagging the dog?

Also, what of the contemporary worship? It may seem as if it is a regrettable trend, but as Fred notes, “Surprisingly, it’s the younger generation that’s moving back to the substance of formal worship, rather than the emotion of contemporary. It’s the baby boomers who want the contemporary, not their children.” In essence, it is just a fad. The tried and true methods of worship are holding through it would seem.

By considering the Great Awakening, the individual’s search for meaning, and Rick Warren’s plan to build off of that search, I have shown an abbreviated history of megachurches. So far I have illustrated four of Melissa Wilde’s five variables in such a way that I stated that salvation could be sold to congregants as if it were a product. Therefore, the people seeking spiritual meaning became the target population while the clergy became the sales representatives. Finally, the megachurch has obtained its goal of growth by catering to an individual’s needs (its marketing technique). In the next chapter we will continue to explore the trend towards uncontrolled growth by noticing how individualism has played its role in shaping the theological landscape of America.

## Chapter 3

# What to do with the Individuals (Maintaining Momentum)

On visiting a church service which features contemporary music and worship, the act of standing with arms in the air to praise God is a regular occurrence. The very word “contemporary” suggests that the service is new and exciting. The rules for traditional worship are done away with as congregants are free to praise the way that they feel. Although first century Christians committed similar actions during their services, the notion of letting the Holy Spirit take over the body has only recently been reintroduced into church settings.

Theologian Ted Peters once wrote that the Enlightenment, coupled with Industrialization, caused Westerners to reject two authorities: “We rejected the authority of the king to tell us what to do, and we rejected the authority of the church to tell us how to think” (21). People would come to God as they see fit. Capitalism, coupled with the separation of Church and State, gave Americans a freedom of choice which would include

not only which shopping centers and restaurants we go to, but also which church to attend. With a freedom of religion came uncertainty about whether someone would practice Christianity or not. Since the kings could not force a state-approved creed upon the citizens, religion, as mentioned earlier, became a commodity which could be bought and sold. Take the many new items for sale and add capitalism to the equation and then we get competition among the various religious groups. As Peters asserts, “There is a limit to what we can consume in the way of material goods. . . . We go beyond material wants to consume new personal experiences . . . [such as] . . . the consumption of spiritual experiences” (22). Instead of striving against pagans, churches now had to struggle against each other for membership.

In this chapter we will look at the relationship of the megachurch to the individual by first focusing on the rise of consumerism in the West. Second, we will consider how religion became a business and what its tools are. Finally, we will close with a word about the possible harms which may have resulted.

### **3.1 The Rise of Consumerism**

Throughout the bulk of human history, people had little in the way of social mobility. Your position at birth was your position at death. As birth rates began to increase with the simultaneous decrease in death rates, the world’s population began to dramatically rise. More people meant a larger workforce and therefore greater customer base. Likewise, cleared forests and swamps meant that more land was available for farming and other terrestrial outputs. Technological innovations meant that productivity per

person could be increased. No longer were people working to meet the bare minimum requirements for survival, they now produced in excess to ensure long-term independence (Lambert 26). With falling agricultural prices, more money could be used for luxury items. Americans were now working harder to produce more (Lambert 26). America was seeing the rise of consumerism.

Everything material had to be purchased. Fine clothes and entertainment could finally be afforded by the average worker. Increasingly, materialism began to spill into religion. It was not enough for Christians to simply learn about God. They wanted to see and touch Him, as well (McDannell 1). Christ could be sold on posters, coffee mugs, and even T-shirts. What ever could be produced, Christians wanted an image of their savior on it. But how did this obsession with goods – secular as well as Christian – come to be associated with a religion that preached humility? Max Weber seems to provide the best explanation in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

In a preface to Weber's work, Anthony Giddens writes that Protestantism focuses on this world (xii). Weber elaborates by writing that, "The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world" (40). All of this rhetoric of working in one's position may sound like something out of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but is actually Christian. Because believers are commanded by the Bible to work faithfully in the world (Prov. 10:4), wealth became an outward sign of how hard a person worked. Nowhere has this theology been more prevalent than in Calvinist and Puritan thought. Even "Benjamin Franklin himself, although he was a colourless deist, answers in his autobiography with a quotation from the Bible, which his strict Calvinistic

father drummed unto him again and again in his youth: ‘Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings’ (Prov. xxii. 29). The earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, the result and expression of virtue and proficiency in calling” (Weber 19). When Christians increased in number and wealth, various churches found themselves at the receiving end of this prosperity. Also, as people demanded more choices in worship style and theological teachings, churches found themselves competing against each other for congregants. Simply put, religion had become a business. This is not to say that churches were out to get money or even to score higher membership numbers. Instead, the change that occurred to the religious landscape was inevitable due to turning point in America’s history.

## **3.2 Religion as a Business**

Look at the staff records of any church. You will find more than just the minister and deacons. Nearly every church, no matter how large or small, has an accountant who takes care of the church’s finances. At Sun-Belt Baptist, the accounting office oversees the movement of more than 11 million dollars annually. At megachurches, the accountants work full time, rather than as volunteers on the weekends. At megachurches, bookstores operate throughout the week so that congregants and friendly neighborhood nonmembers can drop by to peruse the titles available. At megachurches, advertisements for upcoming events hang on walls and are distributed as fliers, demonstrating the full power of Adobe PageMaker and a Kinko’s account. At megachurches, the only thing that represents the traditional image of a church as a worship center is during services when everyone prays

and sings from the hymnal. Like a sporting event, parking is a nightmare, multiple welcome centers sport ushers to direct newcomers, and bathrooms employ the latest in sanitation technology – motion-sensitive faucets and toilets.

Everything becomes a sellable good. The Bible, a message to Christians which been handed down to Christians throughout the ages; the Bible, which, according to Pastor Steve, is “the infallible Word of God;” the Bible, the instrument of holy warfare that every believer must possess, is also for sale. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century revivals, the American Tract Society became a very powerful publishing company. By 1829, the organization had produced over six million items which were cheaply produced and sold door-to-door (Le Beau 114).

In *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, Randall Balmer presents the story of the “Bible Bazaar,” a term he uses for the practice of selling spiritual reading material (155-170):

Bibles are big business . . . How big a business? Figures are hard to come by because such firms as Zondervan and Thomas Nelson Publishers of Nashville remain tight-lipped about their Bible sales. In the course of the convention I heard estimates range from \$60 million to \$200 million a year in the United States alone. No one can say for certain how many kinds of Bibles are available, but one distributor estimated that her company stocked over three thousand different translations and editions. Bibles are big business. (159)

Caution must be used before we label the Christian Booksellers as sell outs or using people’s religious inclinations for personal gain. One author even claims that there was never a time in Western history that Christianity was promoted for reasons other than self-interest. “We might as well being looking for unicorns if we believe in the former” (Moore 65). Christians, as commanded by the Bible, are required to promote Christianity. Under the auspices of the Great Commission, that mission is one of the highest responsibilities a believer must act upon.

For those who put religions under the same business categories as General Motors or IBM, R. Laurence Moore writes, “I do not think it perverse to suggest that contemporary religion operates in the marketplace of culture under the purest rules of *laissez-faire* left extant in our ‘modern’ state. Government regulators and tax people put it in a separate category and try to ignore it. No one dares suggest that neon signs blinking the message that ‘Jesus Saves’ may be false advertising” (7). Churches operate under a different set of rules than other “businesses.” They cannot merely put out a better product or use superior advertising. They must work *harder* than secular businesses to attract new buyers. Which is why we must now turn our attention to the techniques that churches use.

### **How SBBC fits the mold**

On my first visit to Sun-Belt Baptist Church, I arrived a considerable amount of time before the service began. I passed the time in the worship center reading the church bulletin and taking in all that was around me. Above the choir loft hangs a projection screen on which announcements ran for an upcoming children’s performance, drama tryouts, and an advertisement for Baptist Terrace Adult Living.

Megachurches, in particular, have done a wonderful job of using current technology in their approach to communicating to members and nonmembers alike. They employ fulltime media ministers to take care of these projects. As told to me by Pastor Steve, “Media ministers are found mostly in larger churches . . . In my case, all of [my projects] are publications, public relations, and marketing.”

SBBC, like so many others, broadcasts its services on TV for people in the community to watch. Television has become an increasingly popular tool for ministry since

1960. At that time, the FCC ruled that network television stations did not have to give time to religious groups to meet public service requirements. Evangelicals responded under the leadership of Oral Roberts by buying failing UHF stations and starting the Christian Broadcasting Network (Moore 248). Since then, liberal Protestants have charged that fundamentalists – the largest users of television – are taking members away from church. In actuality, the evidence suggests the opposite (Moore 249). No matter how gimmicky we may think some religious programming is, the overall effect has been towards positive growth. Pastor Steve noted, “If you are in a metropolitan area that has a largely unchurched population, you have the potential for bringing people to Christ. If you want response, you want to go to the outlet with more secular viewership. You may not get much support [from the religious world], but you can bring people to the church.”

Sociologist Nancy Eiesland observed during the course of her research on megachurches that many congregations have “adopted the resources of most contemporary businesses, seeking to increase their market share. Desktop publishing and computer labels are real ‘God-sends.’ Hebron [her case study] uses these relatively low-tech and inexpensive means to produce a newsletter for individuals who are not regular attendants but who consider the congregation their home church” (195). In addition to its weekly Sunday bulletin, SBBC distributes a monthly magazine which gives readers insight into the happenings of the church.

Not everyone is happy about the mixing of religion and capitalism. “The megachurch movement’s uncritical use of the tools of modernity is . . . a Faustian compact that could one day require the evangelical soul” (Seel). As has been a reoccurring question throughout this thesis, have megachurches had to lose their theology to obtain their large

size?

## Marketing the church

Beyond the use of technology, the best method at attracting new members is through the well established method of connecting with people. Employed by politicians and businessmen for years, a personal touch with others has become the best way of getting people and retaining them. Time and time again I heard from others that the senior pastor at SBBC is a down-to-earth person. Patricia Birkhead wrote that he “was humble like a servant” (161). Rick Warren tries to give off a normal guy persona by wearing Hawaiian shirts in church and speaking of past marital problems during sermons (Stafford 42, 45).

Among the many books and articles now in print giving suggestions on how to better market a church, some authors give warnings about appearing above a prospective follower on the socio-economic ladder. Businesswoman Nanette Levin once told a story of a witness who, while wearing an Armani suit, told the writer to live a humble life (Levin 2SB). She offers the advice of developing a system of checks and balances to monitor how an intended message should be perceived. Levin’s story may be of a warning of pushing too hard, but what of witnesses who are too soft?

The sermons themselves have been tailored to fit the needs of people in everyday lives. On page 13 I mentioned SBBC’s current sermon series on debt. Interchurch coordinator Fred had this to say about my original objections to the sermon topic: “They [the congregants] need to hear about finances, child-rearing, how to behave at work, abstinence – all of those topics need to be addressed by the church. If everything was right, you ought to be able to read the treasure’s report and be saved.”

Church members who witness to others take the role of sophisticated followers of Christ. H. Richard Niebuhr summarizes the progression of thought this way:

Human words are cultural things, along with the concepts with which they are associated. . . The cultural Christians tend to address themselves to the leading groups in society, they speak to the cultured among the despisers of religion; they use the language of the more sophisticated circles. . . They are missionaries to the aristocracy and the middle class. . . they may take pains to show that they do not belong to the vulgar herd of the unenlightened follower of the Master. (104-105)

When this occurs – when people make themselves seem better to glorify God – is there a kind of arrogance which hurts the original intent of missions? Maybe. But if Christians are to witness to everyone, they must be able to make that connection to everyone. Also, Niebuhr’s claim that Christians only seek the most educated members of society is flawed. As we will see on page 40, some evangelicals in particular have never done a good job of connecting their religious fervor with education. When Evangelicals take a stand against science – because discoveries may seem to be contradictory to the Bible – all of Christianity is seen as being against progress.

One consequence of competition between churches was a change in social norms. Rather than being critical of modern forms of leisure and entertainment, religious leaders began to market their own alternatives (Le Beau 114). Such substitutions included praise music and dramatic skits. As Pastor Stafford put it:

[the ministers] really seek to bring people to the point of worshipping in spirit and in truth. There’s no pretense there. They really try to integrate the Word of God so that people understand exactly what they’re doing without dictating what they should do. I think it’s true to what worship is all about and should be all about. It’s not a man-centered or man-exalting service. It’s definitely a focus on God that allows you to sit in a crowded room and have a personal time with the Lord. They truly challenge the congregation to set that time apart so that they can genuinely worship and experience

The dry mass was out and the exciting contemporary service was in. By listening to the praise music around them, people could feel a one-on-one connection with God. People now had meaning in their lives. Sociologist Robert Finke had this to say:

Though religion is still a group phenomenon, which relies on the support, control and rewards of the local church, the open market stresses *personal* conversion and faith. Once again, the religious decision is an individual decision set in the context of a religious market with a wide array of diversity – a diversity that is assured by the diversity of the population and the lack of religious regulation. (625)

Unfortunately, this diversity means that some churches are adopting secular practices to fit religious purposes. Each January brings with it the Super Bowl, the most watched sporting event in the United States. To celebrate this occasion, football patrons around the world host Super Bowl parties or flock to sports bars to watch the game on a big screen. Because it is on a Sunday night, evangelical churches generally have a hard time competing for attendants. Many churches simply cancel services, while others actually use the event as a tool to bring people in.

The Quest coalition of Atlanta combines sports and religion. For example, several area churches showed the Super Bowl on big screen televisions. During commercial breaks and at halftime, a video was shown of professional athletes and coaches witnessing about the Lord, telling of the dangers of drugs, and stressing the importance of self-esteem and a strong family (Sibley J1). Quest has also had athletes speak at school and church youth programs. Call it giving in to secular pressures if you want, but the churches which adapt always win out in the end.

Churches may make liturgical changes as well. It has been the custom of many conservative churches to employ the King James Version of the Bible as its only

translation. Sun-Belt Baptist realized that the out-dated English used in this version bores and confuses many people. The church currently uses the New International Version as its primary source. PowerPoint presentation of sermon outlines are given on a projector screen so that church-goers can follow the pastor's monologue. And the entire service never lasts past 12 o'clock. I watched the pastor one Sunday actually cut the service short once noon hit. He was only half-way through his outline when he looked at his watch and exclaimed, "It's 12 o'clock already? We'll have to get to the rest of this later on." He then proceeded to deliver the invocation and subsequent benediction.

Arriving at this point, I realized that SBBC provided no theology which could be debated. There were no mentionings as to *why* someone must follow the senior pastor's view of financial responsibility. Questions such as, "What will God do if I don't," or, "How does heaven look upon this," were entirely absent from the service. Unlike my upbringing which consisted of philosophy about the Lord's intervention into various situations, SBBC does not provide its congregants with a very important aspect of spiritual growth. Real theology is simply a statement of beliefs as to why God does something – whether or not someone may actually agree with those statements. Churches such as SBBC provide **no** theology upon which to teach congregants.

### **3.3 Problems in Bringing Salvation**

Attracting members through the above processes has not been entirely smooth sailing. Roadblocks have arisen both from within the megachurch and outside. Problems take many forms: apathy among members, pastoral burnout, and, on occasion, theological

squabbles. For all that they have been through, megachurches, by chance or the grace of God, have the amazing ability to take all dilemmas in stride.

The first problem comes in the way of indifference on the part of many congregants. Several church members I talked to suggested that an almost stoic response to requests for volunteers was a major hindrance. It seems to the people that I spoke with that some of the church members joined simply because Sun-Belt Baptist was the largest church in the city. From Dorothy, the bookstore clerk,

If you go to church on Sunday and that's all you do, you don't ever get involved. People put down the church and they shouldn't because they're not involved in the church. There's a difference between coming to church and being a church member and being involved in it . . . I don't encourage them [others] to come especially to this church. But I think you should be involved in a church.

On the occasions that I attended Sun-Belt Baptist, I noticed that after the benediction, there was almost a rush to the doors from quite a number of people. The parking lot was full of congregants eager to leave and run to lunch. People were rarely willing to meet others around them. From my personal experience, I felt as if people looked upon me as a leper. The elder members of the congregation especially seemed as if they did not want to speak with me.

The second roadblock to growth that I heard repeated was that of pastoral exhaustion. The media minister, Steve, said, "There is always a challenge in a leadership position in the church. You see the good, bad, and ugly along with the good. There are so many pastors and church leaders that experience burnout prematurely. The church can be very demanding. That, in a way, makes it more difficult to stay in line spiritually." It is tough to be innovative day in and day out. The constant demand for new material could zap anyone's creative energy. Fred echoed Steve's statement by claiming, "you have a

sustained quality program to maintain for them [the people] because of the consumer mentality.” Such is the nature of the spiritual marketplace. Being the best requires providing the best service on a regular basis. Unfortunately, the demands of so many people is enough to drain anyone.

Outside the walls of the church, objections are still made to the megachurch’s corporation-like approach to membership. Theologian Ted Peters claims that “religious entrepreneurs . . . will take to pandering their wares” (22). He maintains that this “what can we do for you” attitude will lead to two problems: The consumer’s perception towards religion will “fail to apprehend the true essences of religious reality in life,” and the consumption mentality of wealthier nations will cause religions to change their teachings to suit these countries (Peters 23). The first has already been touched upon numerous times. It may or may not be true. The second, however, seems to gain more evidence from Max Weber when he writes, “Why were the districts of highest economic development at the same time particularly favourable to a revolution in the Church?” (4). In other words, capitalism in a country’s economy produce capitalism in its religion. People used to competition in their secular lives want to see competition in their religious lives as well.

At this point, it would only seem fair to revert to our earlier interpretation of supply-side theory’s product to consider a revision to the definition originally given on page 9. At that time I called the product salvation. It is much more than that. It is the entire worship experience: the aesthetic appeal of exciting praise music, the heart-felt dramas, and the image of a powerful organization which must be large because it is God’s will. In essence, salvation has been reduced to individual fulfillment.

Over the course of the past 31 pages, we have had a chance to look at how the

megachurch grew until the present day through the relationship of the church to the individual. Now that we have a better understanding of religion as a business – how it got there and stayed there – we will use the next chapter to look at megachurches and their relationships to the community and culture outside their walls.

# Chapter 4

## What to do with the community (Rendering Unto Caesar)

Mark 12:13-17, as well as Matt. 22:15-22 and Luke 20:20-26, tell the story of the Pharisees who came to Jesus to ask him whether or not they should pay taxes. Jesus replied with the famous words, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.” Paul later tells his followers to respect government authority. It would seem as if Christians should work with the world at large. During his sermon series on debt, the senior pastor at Sun-Belt Baptist Church echoed Jesus’ line telling attendees that they must be faithful in their tax payments. He said, “But it seems as if Caesar wants more and more.” He then side-stepped his original sermon to speak for a bit about how *all* political parties wish to take away our money and spend it on unnecessary projects – money that would better serve its purpose in the private sector. Several people shouted, “Amen!” in a agreement.

In this chapter we will consider some of the ways in which megachurches have

worked within the realms of culture – particularly in politics and education. H. Richard Niebuhr’s book *Christ and Culture* details five ways that Christians have acted with culture. In sum, the work of a megachurch is like that of a fireman’s. During the course of his job he may try to put out a flame so that the lives of others may be saved. Sometimes, however, he gets burned in the process. In much the same way, megachurches try to control culture from a position considered above it, while at the same time integrating various aspects of that same culture. The church adapts to societal norms – hence, its use of secular advertising – while it also tries to change others that are seen as sinful. For example, the church cannot claim that advertising corporations are destroying the meaning of Christianity with commercials about Christmas, when at the same time, the churches themselves are also employing marketing techniques to rein in new members.

When asked about the role of the megachurch as interacting with culture, interchurch coordinator Fred replied,

In the best tradition of the megachurch, they don’t want to the interact with culture. They want to influence culture. Their hope would be that by numbers and presence, they could do that. A deeper concern would be do megachurches end up conforming to the norms of culture? Which raises the question how different are Christians from the world as they are supposed to be? One of the things working for them – they could offer the influences. One of the things working against them is that people could be along for the ride.

Indeed, every person and minister I interviewed at SBBC admitted that the church has a responsibility to culture in general. George Whitefield was the first to realize that instruments of culture could be employed to fulfill his goals. We have already discussed how he used his business and marketing skills to attract new members. He took preaching outside of the church and into the public sphere. When clergy complained that he should stay out of marketplaces and keep his sermons within buildings made for God, he replied

that sinners are everywhere (Lambert 61). If Christians are to reach everyone, they must be willing to go everywhere. A risk exists when Christians become too involved with culture and unfortunately, megachurches have fallen into that risk. They have lost their ability to criticize culture once they started integrating it. For instance, Christians cannot claim that companies are sensationalizing the Bible while Sun-Belt Baptist is busy selling tickets to its congregants for a *Left Behind* conference.

Pastor Stafford spoke of SBBC's prophetic leanings by saying, "It's both prophetic and very encouraging in our approach. Sometimes the Word comes and it is a rebuke and sometimes it's an exhortation . . . Sometimes you hear the truth and you're on target and sometimes you aren't on target. Hopefully it's corrected." It would seem as if SBBC is not trying to push away culture entirely. There are some good points.

If megachurches are trying to influence the surrounding culture, we might imagine that some in the surrounding culture would not take too kindly to having their livelihoods dictated to by churches. Pastor Safford admits, "Sometimes we adopt a position that doesn't please everyone. We are committed to having an impact on the culture. Our pastor is always encouraging us to do that whether as a church or as an individual." Or as given a more cautionary tone by Fred, "I think you have to work harder to be prophetic in a megachurch. . . They are at the front line of countering culture with Christ. . . The danger is being overly outspoken. Every pastor has to deal with failure. But with a megachurch, if you fail, you fail in a big way.

Others on the outside, however, may look upon the megachurch's movement as a good thing. We have already discussed the number of people who join the church simply because of its size. Others know the church for its political leanings. Pastor Stafford told

me,

We have a good reputation in [our home city]. I think they know us for taking a very strong conservative stand in government issues and things that relate to our city; but also having a very compassionate view towards others and that we welcome so many different groups that may or may not believe what we believe. But the idea is that we're a place with our arms open wide. And we're willing to open our doors and invite you to be a part of us. We've hosted services for police officials, fire officials. We've done things to let them know how much we appreciate them. Several things like that where we've said, "Hey, if you need a place to have that event, you can have it here because we support what you do." Most anybody that runs for office in this town or even at the state level has come here for a service. No matter what their political affiliation is, they have felt welcome here.

The church's size would garner not only superficial respect from politicians, but its range of influence would have a tremendous effect on actually changing the political climate.

## 4.1 Politics

Megachurches use their size to push conservative agendas most notably in the areas of war, social justice, and personal liberties such and homosexuality and abortion. On every occasion that I have happened to visit Sun-Belt Baptist for a Sunday morning service, the senior pastor has stated that if the country should go to war with Iraq, he will deliver a sermon the following week on just wars.<sup>1</sup>

Many congregants of SBBC know members of the armed forces or are personnel themselves. The thought of going to war may not appeal to many people, but the general consensus among members was that an invasion of Iraq is necessary. However, in every instance in which the pastor has told us of his sermon plans, he has offered no opinions as to whether or not such an armed conflict is biblical or not – if Christ is above culture.

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<sup>1</sup>The research for this thesis occurred in months preceding *Operation: Iraqi Freedom*.

Megachurches have, however, pushed for other areas of social justice. These topics may not take the form of liberal environmentalism and feminism, but evangelicals are still involved in what seems important to them. The megachurches can do a good job of attracting followers by compassion for issues outside of the walls of the church. Sociologist Emile “Durkheim spoke of the sacred vs. profane, but Christianity claims that God is immanent and transcendent” (McDannell 5). Megachurches seek practical solutions to real-world problems, rather than concern themselves with apocalyptic rituals. In other words, the Lord would play an important role in daily life. The teachings of the Bible would be employed by writers and churches to all areas of even secular life. As noted by one author,

Literally scores of such organizations and publications vie with one another trying to capture a following, most focused on personal faith and spirituality, but also many addressing social causes and a “prophetic spirituality” that encourages relating biblical faith to specific programs working for social transformation. What these organization and publication accomplish is an expansion of opportunities for “tailoring” one’s spiritual style around a particular issue, for example, prison ministry, the environments, the homeless, family life, abortion. (Roof 93)

The churches see aspects of culture which they deem as against God and will take to great lengths to fixing such dilemmas. In essence, some Protestants believe that life should imitate the goodness of the Lord (Noll 39). This is not to say that evangelicals are trying to create Heaven on Earth or even bring back the Garden of Eden. They know the former is out of reach and that the latter is gone forever. Instead, they are working within the teachings of 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of James – “faith without works is dead.” It is like Max Weber writes, the elect should use good works to augment the grace of God (69). These works get rid of the fear of damnation.

Megachurches such as SBBC minister to prisoners, have members who work in soup kitchens, and donate hundreds of thousand of dollars each year to world hunger programs. They sometimes use secular businesses to fund religious goals. Capitalism becomes an instrument for Jesus' ministry. George Whitefield set up a cotton manufactory to finance Bethesda, his orphanage in Georgia (Lambert 60). His action reminds me of the Mormons who, while not evangelical, own the Marriott hotel chain. When they have to compete against other chains for customers, they are reduced to competition just like the rest of them.

Megachurches also try to get involved with governmental affairs. Politicians know that megachurches offer huge voting blocks and will often try to appease these groups to lock in a large number of supporters. Many politicians claim to favor family values and other evangelical agendas. Earlier I mentioned that Jimmy Carter had spoken at SBBC. Pastor Stafford claimed that many politicians come to the church when campaigning, in my mind to seek the congregation's blessing. Again, Christ is both above and within culture in the minds of the megachurches.

On one Sunday, the senior pastor spent a bit of his sermon speaking on ways to get out of debt. He told us that gambling is immoral and should never be used, especially to fix money problems. For the first time, he tossed aside his usual calm demeanor and began to bang on the podium and exclaim that he will never support legalized gambling because it hurts not only people who play, but the taxpayers to have to help the addicts. "No how, no way!" he exclaimed. After his tirade was finished, a substantial number of people in attendance began clapping and cheering.

On the local level, SBBC has organized efforts to protest laws which would give

special rights to homosexuals. When I asked Pastor Stafford about the danger of mixing politics and religion, he replied, “I don’t think there is [a danger] for us because we’ve had a couple of incidents where we were at city council meetings where we were voicing our concerns about an amendment that was being proposed. We were very much against it. I felt like we did it in a very loving way but without compromise. I really feel as if you can be effective without the compromise.” Although the amendment passed, SBBC’s presence was well felt. While Baptists have historically called for a separation of Church and State – meaning that the government should not regulate religious organizations – they hypocritically advocate the Church’s control of the State. They have tried to introduce legislation which would put the Ten Commandments in schools, outlaw genetic manipulation and cloning, and promote the evangelical concept of “family values.” Their lobbying requires the use of lawyers, money, and political deals – items which are generally not associated with pious Christianity. In essence, the fireman is being burned by attempting to rescue others from his understanding of flames.

Evangelicals have not worked only in the political sphere. In order to effectively cause a change, they figure they would have to start at the very beginning. Christians have always had special schools to remove children and even adults from the corrupting atmosphere of the secular world. But the act of using religious education for the sake of going against norms of science and literature seems to be the most damning aspect of evangelical thought. When we think of the question of losing theology, evangelicals openly submit themselves as guilty in the area of education. They, for all intensive purposes, are claiming that ignorance is bliss.

## 4.2 Evangelical Education

When the Vision Committee concluded in the early 1980s that Sun-Belt Baptist Church would have to move to a new location, it also suggested that the church build its own school. In 1994, the academy graduated its first senior class with 22 members (Birkhead 199). Many megachurches have, or are at least affiliated with, elementary and secondary educational facilities. Unfortunately, most evangelical schools are seen as providing less than adequate preparation for college and beyond. From personal experience, the vast majority of conservative Christian schools that I have known teach against widely held scientific beliefs such as evolution and the Big Bang theory.

Mark Noll, in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, states that the evangelical move to have all knowledge come from God, and not from man, has caused Protestants to lose out on intellectualism. In doing so, the church has a harder time making a critical argument against culture. Megachurches themselves have closed in so that everything a member does flows through the church somehow. Although Catholics try a similar practice today, Protestants became fully aware of the churching of everything during the revivals.

The problem with revivalism for the life of the mind, however, lay precisely in its antitraditionalism. Revivals called people to Christ as a way of escaping tradition, including traditional learning. They called upon individuals to take the step of faith for themselves. In so doing, they often left the impression that individual believers could accept nothing from others. Everything of value in the Christian life had to come from the individual's own choice – not just personal faith but every scrap of wisdom, understanding, and conviction about the faith. (Noll 63).

Basically, what Noll is getting at is that evangelicals have a hard time believing anything unless it is based on personal conviction. Intellectualism suffered as a result because it is

difficult to feel right about all areas of knowledge. For example, I cannot verify everything in science for myself simply because I do not possess the equipment to do so. Therefore, I cannot believe scientific claims. I think Noll may have taken his claim a little too far. For example, most evangelicals do not question what their ministers tell them. This sheep-like attitude on the part of many believers hurts not their personal development, but also the idea of *Sola Scriptura*. The Protestant assertion that all dogma should come from the Bible is lost when a congregant follows his/her pastor without challenge. Likewise, the Reformation had its set of problems, too:

The new Protestant commitment to the priesthood of believers also seemed to undercut the need for intellectual experts. Protestant belief in the activity of the Holy Spirit among the entire church seemed to deny the need for special efforts in learning. Was not merely “the Bible alone” enough? If a person possessed the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, what need was there for learning? So it was that the Reformation appeared at least to some as a profoundly anti-intellectual movement. (Noll 36)

Here, we again see the harm of using religion as the be all and end all of knowledge. Once spirituality becomes the standard by which to judge information, the objectivity of science and research is lost.

The consequences of closed-minded Christianity are rather severe. Mark Noll claims that “the results of neglecting the mind are uniform: Christian faith degenerates, lapses in to gross errors, or simply passes out of existence” (44). While the Christian faith has not passed out of existence, it has seen its fair share of errors. I would add to Noll’s list other concerns such as pushing the secular world away, fighting among other churches and denominations, and saying hate-motivated things such as, “Mohammed was a demon-possessed pedophile.”

Megachurches, fundamentalist ones especially, have long been known for leading mass groups of people into an intellectual abyss. People who blindly follow their leaders – the ones giving them their meaning – are likely not to ask questions about the validity of their pastor’s teachings. In addition, they may lose any inclination towards an inquisitive nature. When asking questions such as how did the world get here or what is the mind, evangelicals will reply that God is the only answer. “It is of small consequence – or none – that evangelicals have no research university or that they have no Nobel laureates” (Noll 51).<sup>2</sup> While no evangelical has ever won a Nobel Prize, Noll’s work was published in 1994. Recently, Baylor University, a Texas Baptist school, has stated that it would like to become “the first real evangelical Christian research university” (Balmer, “2012” 65). As part of its ten-year plan, the university wants to go on a massive building spree to develop new programs and attract high-profile faculty. Its goal is to become the only Christian top tier school with a firm rejection of the idea that “‘intellectual excellence’ and ‘intense faithfulness to the Christian tradition’ are mutually exclusive” (Balmer, “2012” 64). In short, it wants to become the “Protestant Notre Dame.”

Despite Baylor’s noble efforts, it will be difficult to enact change to a system which demands the separation of Church and high intellectualism. Our country already has enough Christian universities. Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson – all lacking educational credentials – have each established Christian universities. “Small wonder that evangelical thinking so often appears naïve, inept, or tendentious” (Noll 17). From my own educational upbringing, I can say that schools which are closely aligned with religious institutions often have academics which are as poor in quality as many public schools. It is

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<sup>2</sup>Jimmy Carter holds a Nobel Peace Prize.

rather unfortunate that Christians, despite coming out of the Dark Ages, still revert to the shell of intellectualism which they have always inhabited. The best advice that could be offered is, “Dogmatism should be resisted. Faith should result in joy, inner peace, tolerance, getting along with one another” (Wuthnow 312). Sadly, this day may never arrive. When every member of the educational process is against education, the sole receivers of the learning experience – the children – are the ones who are hurt.

Coming to this point, I think we can now complete our interpretation of supply-side theory. The structure variable, our only component yet to be defined, would take the role of a top-down approach to sales. Starting with the senior pastor, every member of the megachurch plays an important role in the spiritual marketplace. The music and media pastors convince people that this church is *the* place that provides the meaning that they have been searching for. Congregants who buy-in complete the equation and allow the church the bragging rights of another soul saved. Unfortunately, if the church cannot provide members with any form of theological instruction, it misses the opportunity to train new forbearers of Christ’s message.

Over the course of this chapter, we have explored the relationship of the megachurch to its surrounding culture. By first looking at politics and then at education, we have a better understanding why evangelicals seem to have undergone a brainwashing – or at least a weakened stance – when it comes to theology. Their entire lives – both secular and religious, from birth until the present – have been dominated by the church. The real scandal, it would seem, stems from the refusal of evangelicals to separate true spiritual meaning from emotion and ill-fated hopes.

# Chapter 5

## Last Words and Conclusions

Like any regular worship service, Sundays at Sun-Belt Baptist Church feature prayer time in which the music minister spends about five minutes praying for contemporary issues such as helping the president to make the right decision and a thank you, Lord, for letting the church move out of mere broadcast T.V. and into nation-wide cable. From the perfect enunciation of words and the flawless timing, I could tell the pastor was not praying from his heart, but he was reading an outline and trying to sound dramatic. I was angry that church could be reduced to such a performance. But how did it get this way?

Over the past four chapters we have taken a look at how religion in America went from a seemingly pious endeavor to a full-scale business, complete with marketing and sales. Unfortunately, we must realize that my portrait of a once perfect religion is flawed. In fact, there has never been a “golden age” of Christianity (Moore 9). Throughout its entire history, people have fought for attention. From Augustine to Luther to Whitefield, ministers have struggled to obtain recognition as the bearer of God’s news.

18<sup>th</sup> century America was a much different place than today. Few people attended

church regularly. There was almost a boredom across the landscape. Religious freedom allowed people to pick and choose religion at their discretion. The climate was ripe for competition and, more importantly, the business of spirituality.

George Whitefield saw the time as one that was moving further away from the hand of God. This itinerate preacher took it upon himself to bring piety to the United States. His rivals, dubbed the Great Awakening, caused Americans to go back to church. Whitefield was known for his amazing preaching ability which could bring any hearer to repent – a feat we might find strange since Whitefield found his salvation from the printed word (Lambert 18).

Fast forward to the mid-1900s. Americans, most particularly Baby Boomers, began to cast aside their rejection of spirituality as they looked for meaning in their lives. Churches, through the use of contemporary services, were able to provide that meaning. Supply-side theory provides a good explanation of how churches were able to dangle salvation in front of a convert's face like a carrot in front of a rabbit. Churches were no longer prayer houses. They had become businesses. They had a product to sell and the marketing to do so. Those who played the game the best grew up to become megachurches while everyone was left behind.

Unfortunately, we have to examine the intent of megachurches. Are they simply successful at bringing members to salvation, or are they trying to accomplish a large membership base? Some megachurches seem unashamed of negative labels may be conferred upon them. Rick Warren states that he would like to see his church become a "Cineplex," where multiple venues use videotaped sermons and various music styles so that "you would never feel late because there is always a service about to begin somewhere"

(Stafford 44).

Money pours into megachurches by the millions. A quick inspection of the attire and cars used by members makes me wonder if the church is legitimating the hoarding of wealth. R. Laurence Moore warns us that success is not a sign of selling out or worldliness (55). Instead, it may be like Max Weber tells us and be a sign of the Protestant Work Ethic: possessions demonstrate faith in God (Weber 61).

Religious leaders could be seen as if they are like puppets of big businesses. Although no one is opening challenging that churches are actually agents of corporations, one writer points to what he calls the “Disneyfication” of Christianity (Budde 77). Another claims that although missionaries and marketers may appear to be different, they both “strive to incite passionate longing toward something far better, for which those seduced must pay a price” (Belke 337). He goes so far as to label both groups as “pimps.”

And what of the intent of the members themselves? We have already seen the concern of some congregants that people may join megachurches simply because they are the largest organizations. Although individuals admit to the church’s problems, they still like the group. Ron, a Sunday School teacher, said, “Like any other church and like any other organization we have warts and freckles. But by and large, this is the best.”

We finished our examination of the megachurch by looking at its role with the surrounding culture. We saw that although the general consensus of Americans is to have a separation of Church and State, groups such as SBBC are willing to stand on the front lines and take a conservative view of politics. Sometimes, this intermingling with culture can be seen in the fireman example. A person who gets too close to the flames may be burned.

When it comes to children, megachurches try to integrate religion and education by

often employing their own schools or becoming affiliates of another. Unfortunately, history has taught us that when conservative theological beliefs are mixed with the investigative process, education always loses out. Mark Noll calls the whole development “the scandal of the evangelical mind.”

Coming to this point we must ask ourselves, is this a problem? My case study, Sun-Belt Baptist Church, had its fair share of well-meaning members who wanted nothing more than to find meaning in their lives. Unfortunately, their search for meaning led them to a church which offered little or nothing in the way of spiritual growth. While the Sunday sermons may have given practical advice on financial management, they did nothing to teach the congregants about God’s purpose. No areas were explored which could have been open for debate – the mark of good theological speculation. Hence, in attempting to accommodate to its many members, the megachurch has lost its theology.

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