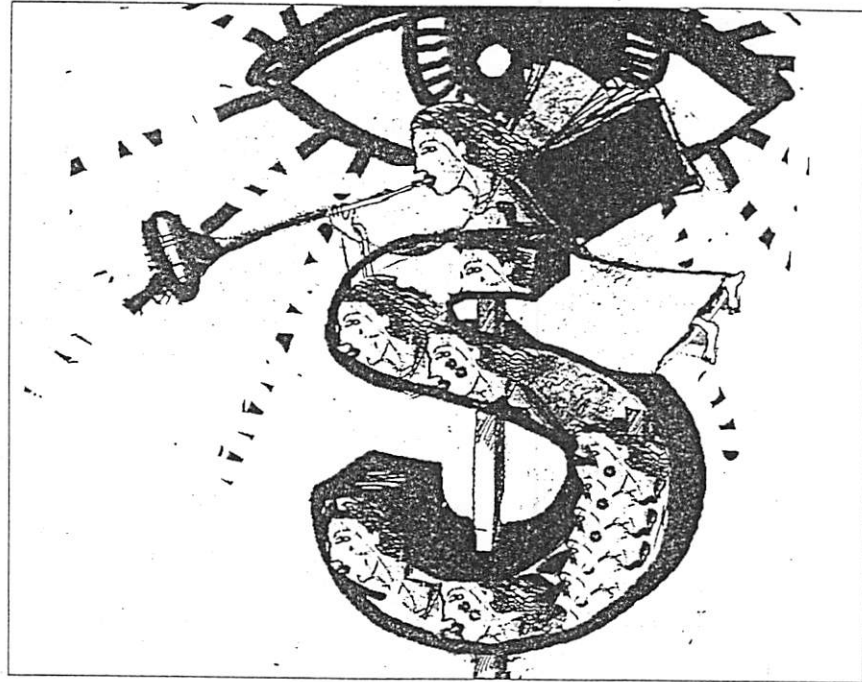


God and Mammon in Christian Publishing

by Gene Edward Veith



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That one can find Christian bookstores in nearly every shopping mall is doubtless a good sign. While our intellectual and cultural establishments refuse to factor God into their equations, there is an alternative network of publishing houses and bookstores devoted entirely to religion. While millions of ordinary Americans have stopped reading altogether, Christians, particularly conservative Christians, are still reading voraciously.

Though many segments of the publishing industry have been hurting, Christian publishing has been thriving. In only four years, from 1991 to 1994, sales of religious books shot up 92 percent, from 36.7 million to 70.5 million. Nearly seven percent of all books sold are religious. Today, the network of Christian publishers and bookstores, mostly representing evangelical Protestantism, make up a three billion dollar industry.

And yet, Christian thought does not seem to be any more prominent in the marketplace of ideas. Even as its market share increases, the influence of Christianity on American culture continues to shrink. Part of the reason may be that Christians, with their publishing arms, have become something of a subculture, set off and kept separate from the mainstream. To the extent that this has happened, it is not necessarily due to a fundamentalist impulse to separate from the sinful world; rather, conservative Christians have been marginalized against their will by an aggressively secularist media and academic es-

tablishment.

But there is another factor in the paradox that while churches are growing, Christianity is declining. If churches are not exercising much influence on the culture, the culture is certainly exercising a great deal of influence on the church. This is evident not only in the mainline liberal denominations, which make a point of aping cultural trends. These liberal churches are in fact declining, having become so indistinguishable from "the world" that few people can find a reason to get up early on Sunday to go to them anymore. Today, it is the evangelical churches that are growing. But ironically, they are now capitulating to the secularist culture. This has nothing to do with the triumph of nonreligious ideas or ideologies, which in fact have never seemed less credible; the new worldliness of evangelicalism is due to the utter victory of free-market capitalism.

The new creed of American religion is commercialism. Today, doctrine and practice are shaped not so much by Scripture and certainly not by tradition, but by marketing research, consumer surveys, and the overarching goal of reaching a mass market by giving the customers what they want. This is stated in so many words in the literature, seminars, and consultant reports of the so-called "church growth movement." The results can be seen in the "mega-churches" now scattered throughout our nation's suburbs, whose architecture and corporate mission statements show them to be enormous spiritual shopping malls.

The emergence of a new pop Christianity—and an explanation of why the values of the free market, inestimable as they are in many other spheres, are not necessarily beneficial for theology—can perhaps best be seen in what has happened to the Christian publishing industry. Christian publishing companies had their beginnings as denominational presses—church-

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es needed to publish Sunday School curricula, Bible study resources, and theological treatises that reflected their own theological distinctiveness. Nondenominational tract societies, college student ministries, and other groups committed to evangelism and the promulgation of the Christian faith also turned to publishing, a fitting medium particularly for the strongly Word-centered emphasis of Protestant evangelicalism. In Michigan, a number of pious laymen of the Reformed persuasion started family businesses devoted to serving Christ through what they published, companies such as William B. Eerdmans, Fleming H. Revell, Baker Book House, and Zondervan.

Many Christian publishers today still retain their denominational identity or missionary purpose. But the balance between mission and business is not always easy to keep. As the Christian publishing industry grew and became more successful, it had to face the iron laws of competition and the need for capital. Its economic success also attracted investors whose sole interest was the bottom line.

In 1969, Sam Moore, who began as a door-to-door Bible salesman, bought Thomas Nelson, the venerable British publisher of the King James Version. To raise capital for the venture, he went public, selling shares of his new company on the stock exchange. Mr. Moore kept the Thomas Nelson name, moved the company to Nashville, and expanded its scope and its sales. An updated translation of the 1611 classic, the New King James Bible, was a hit with the Bible-buying public. Thomas Nelson branched out into fiction, popular scholarship, biographies, and inspirational titles.

Zondervan, a company with deep roots in the Calvinist tradition (which historically has usually distanced itself from the revivalism and emphasis on personal experience that characterizes most American evangelicals) also hit it big with a Bible. The New International Version, a new translation that aspired to both accuracy and readability for modern readers, became a runaway best-seller. Zondervan, too, expanded its list to cover the whole gamut of religious writing, from theological scholarship and Bible-study aids to more popular titles on child-raising and conversion narratives.

Another company, Word Publishers of Dallas, Texas, rode the wave of the charismatic movement of the 1970's with one top-seller after another. Though Word did not have a Bible to publish, it did have the new genre of "Contemporary Christian Music." Word branched off into the recording industry, putting Christian lyrics to a rock 'n' roll beat and launching music superstars of their own to a vast audience of Christian teenagers.

By the 1980's, although a multitude of other publishers were turning out successful titles, Thomas Nelson, Zondervan, and Word had become "the big three" of Christian publishing. Their success made them intriguing targets for secular investors in this age of corporate mergers and takeovers. In 1984, Word was purchased by ABC, the television network (which itself would be purchased by Capital Cities in 1986). In 1988, Zondervan was purchased by the publishing giant HarperCollins, which is part of the media empire of Rupert Murdoch, the Australian mogul whose holdings run from sleazy tabloids to the FOX Television Network. (Yes, Rupert Murdoch owns the copyright to the New International Version of the Bible.)

Then the big three became the big two. In 1992, Thomas Nelson bought Word from Capital Cities for \$72 million in

cash. (This transaction kept Word from belonging to Disney, which bought Capital Cities in 1996, preventing the irony of Disney-boycotters being published by a Disney conglomerate.) In the terms of the merger, the two companies would retain their separate names and catalogues, but Nelson/Word is now a single corporate entity—owned not by a church, a ministry, or a pious family but by stockholders trading on the New York Stock Exchange.

Now what is wrong with Rupert Murdoch and Wall Street tycoons owning the two biggest Christian publishers? In principle, nothing. In the labyrinthine maze of corporate ownership, a company can still maintain its independence and its principles regardless of who happens to hold its stock. And part of the conservatism that characterizes most evangelical Protestants surely includes a high respect for the free enterprise system, with its entrepreneurship, profit-taking, and networks of private property. Religion, however, is one of the few realms that is not enhanced by commercial considerations. As Christianity's founder observed, no one can serve both God and Mammon at the same time (Luke 16:13).

For one thing, publicly held corporations are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion in their hiring. Churches and nonprofit religious groups can, of course, since they have a First Amendment right to promote their religious identities. Practices taken for granted in religious ministries, such as hiring only Christians, much less Christians holding particular religious doctrines, suddenly becomes problematic.

And then there is the pressure to turn a profit. Proclaiming God's Law and spreading the Gospel are never particularly popular—human beings rebel at the notion that they are sinners, and Christ and the message of salvation through His Cross are described in Scripture as scandals and stumbling blocks (1 Corinthians 1:23). The temptation, then, is to make the message more palatable to consumers, something easier to sell.

Not surprisingly, then, conflicts broke out in the Christian publishing industry with their new corporate masters. In 1992, for example, managers at Zondervan led a group of employees in an attempt to buy the company back from HarperCollins and Mr. Murdoch. The goal, according to then-president James Buick, was "to return the direction and control of the company into the Christian community." The employee buy-out attempt failed, and HarperCollins solidified its control.

While at first HarperCollins kept a hands-off approach, letting Zondervan operate as it always had, before long the parent company started to interfere. A dictate was handed down that Zondervan must publish more books that sell more and fewer that sell fewer. Academic lines were scrapped. Sales thresholds were established. Zondervan's priorities shifted to the mass-market, to titles that would appeal to the broadest possible audience.

Consider, for example, the autobiography of hamburger mogul Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's. The book, appropriately titled *Well Done!*, is mildly inspirational—in the Horatio Alger sense—but it has no explicitly Christian content. HarperCollins wanted to co-publish the book with Zondervan, and thus it was so. The book had huge promotional tie-ins with the hamburger chain and was featured in nearly every Christian bookstore in the country.

The big two and the scores of smaller publishing companies continued to publish works of theological integrity. But the dynamics of the industry started to change. The church-based and family business publishers had a hard time competing with

the deep pockets and corporate backing of Zondervan and Nelson/Word. Popular authors developed by the small publishers jumped ship to the big players for multimillion dollar advances, sums unthinkable for the small publishing houses. As a result, the small houses found themselves having to play the same game. They needed celebrity authors and surefire best-sellers to remain competitive. While some publishers—Crossway, Baker, various denominational presses, and others—have managed to hold on to their theological integrity, many have turned to what can only be described as pop Christianity.

Walk into a typical Christian bookstore today. Try to find the books. Knickknacks, CDs, videos, inspirational posters, greeting cards, T-shirts, and related merchandise (what the prophets of old might have assailed as graven images) take up two-thirds of the shelf space, according to industry statistics. Books make up only 28 percent of sales. The relatively few books that are stocked, therefore, need to have high turnover.

Many Christian bookstores only stock the best-sellers. Wholesalers have programs to supply bookstores with titles that promise big sales, offering mass quantities at a big discount. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy, since the books they provide are the only ones on the shelf for the customers to buy.

The most striking feature of the Christian marketplace is how closely it imitates the trends and fads of its secular counterpart. Whenever a trend emerges in the secular arena, wait six months and a Christianized version will appear in the religious bookstores. Romance novels sell millions—there are now Christian romance novels, which are slightly less steamy with less provocative covers. Horror stories remain big sellers; there is Christian horror. Tom Clancy's high-tech, three-inch thick military thrillers have inspired Christian counterparts, as have John Grisham's legal thrillers (though the original Mr. Clancy and Mr. Grisham are already, by all accounts, Christians). There are Christian diet books and Christian exercise videos, Christian cookbooks and sex manuals. Christian commercialism is even getting on the bandwagon with management books, such as Thomas Nelson's *The Management Methods of Jesus* and *The People Skills of Jesus: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Business*.

Even when it comes to religion, Christian publishing tends to follow, rather than lead, the culture. The New Age movement, interested in angelic "spirit guides," spawned some best-sellers about angels. Christian publishers followed suit with their books on angels. Near death experiences were big for awhile in the secular press, provoking a rash of Christian books on the same subject (sometimes documenting visions of Hell along with those of the "bright light"). Celebrity worship is big in America's pop culture. Thus, ghost-written books by sports stars, entertainers, people in the news, and individuals who are famous for being famous are much-prized by Christian publishers (particularly if they feature a dramatic conversion experience, though this is not necessary anymore). Certain authors acquire big followings, and while many—such as Billy Graham and Chuck Swindoll—may have valuable things to say, the preference for celebrity writers sometimes squeezes out authors who are not already famous.

Self-help is a major category in the secular bookstores, but it has become a specialty of Christian publishers. Here the theological consequences of the new commercialism are especially obvious. Evangelical Protestantism has always stressed God's help—that is to say, His grace—rather than the human being's

capacity to help himself. The Bible consists of God's Law—which convicts the reader of the fact that he cannot keep it and is, in fact, a desperate sinner—and of the Gospel of Christ, which promises free forgiveness through Christ's atonement on the cross. Pop Christianity, on the other hand, sees the Bible as a self-help manual, a guide for successful living. God's Law is reduced to practical principles, which are rather easy to follow and which promise a happy middle-class lifestyle. In practice, this often means books that are little more than pop psychology, with an ever-so-thin veneer of religious language. Happiness comes from feeling good about yourself, as in Robert Schuller's *Be (Happy) Attitudes*, or from being assertive, as in Nelson/Word's title *Don't Let Jerks Get the Best of You*. This is a far cry from "take up your cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

More direct doctrinal compromises are sometimes to be found. Word published *Searching for God in America*, based on a PBS series which cited Islam and Buddhism as being equally valid with Christianity as paths to God. Recently, Zondervan caused a firestorm in evangelical circles when it began revising the New International Version of the Bible to give it "gender-inclusive language," which often meant changing the supposedly divinely inspired words of the original Hebrew and Greek to make them more palatable to our politically correct and feminist-chastened ears. When word of the de-gendered NIV—which was already available in England—came out, the uproar was so great that Zondervan and the Bible translators changed their plan, at least for now (though Tyndale's *The Living Bible*, a paraphrase rather than a translation, is also reportedly undergoing the same kind of revision).

Pop Christianity has also manifested itself in whole churches, which, though once conservative, are now eagerly following the culture in their zeal to bring in vast numbers of worshipers. Classic hymns are jettisoned in favor of pop music; time-tested liturgies are thrown out for "user-friendly" worship styles and "entertainment evangelism." Pastors are transforming themselves into CEOs; the members of their congregations are seen as customers, as consumers, to be manipulated by marketing techniques. The ancient faith, which has done so much not only to save souls but to shape Western civilization, is being turned into just another commodity. Worse, by slavishly following the culture, it becomes unable to critique that culture and to call us back to moral and spiritual sanity.

Not all contemporary Christianity is shallow, insipid, and secularized. Many people are rediscovering the faith in all of its depth, richness, and transcendence. One can even find books on the subject. But these Christians must increasingly struggle not only against the secular culture but against its mirror-image in the Christian subculture. In the meantime, those looking for a way out of our current cultural malaise often have a hard time finding authentic Christianity.

The good news is that human beings, whether in "the world" or the church, cannot live for long merely as economic animals, no matter how good the economy is. Some traditional churches are growing by welcoming what one pastor described to me as "casualties of the church-growth movement," those who crave a sense of transcendence and the practice of Biblical spirituality. Once Christian publishers become indistinguishable from the secular publishers, there will not be much need for them, and they will doubtless fade away or be absorbed into the generic marketplace. Then perhaps someone will start a tract society again. ◀