

*Pastor's Papers* | Ronald H. Gann  
Ministry/Church

### ***Ministry vs. Marketing***

A Critical Assessment Of Church Ministry In America (Part 2)  
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**M**y telephone conversation with Pastor Steve<sup>1</sup> ended somewhat contentiously. I slammed the phone down disillusioned and frustrated, wondering what I had gotten myself into. How could I have agreed to intern under this man's headship, godly though he may be? The growing gulf between our two philosophies of ministry seem to rival the Grand Canyon and I was now at a loss as to how to reconcile our views.

Pastor Steve was a 52-year old trailblazer when I met him; a reformed wreck-loose with over thirty years of experience invested in the ministry. A soft-spoken gentleman whose younger days of substance abuse seemed to take its toll by middle-age, his godliness was honorable. Indeed, very few men I know could match his spiritual discipline. But being a trailblazing Christian does not, by design, necessarily a stellar pastor make. And both Pastor Steve and I learned this lesson the hard way.

Pastor Steve came to Christ as a college student in the mid-1970s. Miraculously delivered from narcotic addiction after his conversion, his love for Jesus Christ quickly became his new intoxicant. The same chemically-enhanced adrenalin that once coursed through his veins in search of his next kick now flowed in hot pursuit of a sanctified life with God. But in his enthusiasm to serve the Lord, he made a bold, if not haphazard, decision about his future. To everyone's surprise, he changed his college major without notice, convinced that God had called him into ministerial work. It would be a decision that would come under scrutiny repeatedly throughout the next three decades.

Without any undergraduate training in the Bible or even a rudimentary knowledge of Christian doctrine, Pastor Steve transferred his credits to seminary to pursue pastoral training. Before long, the perplexities of Greek and Hebrew and the mental gymnastics inherent to systematic theology proved daunting. As a newborn Christian, he was in over his head. One poor grade eventually led to another until finally his dwindling GPA betrayed any realistic chance of graduating. Embarrassingly, he flunked out of seminary.

Always the optimist, Pastor Steve eventually rebounded, no doubt sustained by the prayers of friends and family. He petitioned his school for reinstatement and was eventually granted a second chance on condition he demonstrate a determined effort to raise his GPA. He reapplied himself to his studies and, in due course, managed to pass his required classes.

He landed his first ministerial job as a youth pastor not long after graduation. By the mid-1980s, youth ministry had apparently lost its luster and he decided to take a leave of absence. Waiting for him in the wings was a job in California serving as a

ministry consultant with a para-church organization. He applied for the position and was eventually accepted. For the next ten years Pastor Steve served as a professional advisor to churches, helping them formulate a clear, focused, and effective process of ministry. With a special emphasis on balanced growth and church reproduction, this popular organization ultimately molded his philosophy of ministry.

In the mid-1990s he returned to pulpit ministry on the East Coast, accepting the senior pastorate of a modest-sized church. It was during this time that Pastor Steve was brutally reminded of the hardships of pastoral shepherding as infighting and political wrangling slowly began to corrode the church's vitality. Regrettably, despite his committed efforts to rehabilitate the congregation, a very public dissolution occurred, leaving him emotionally disillusioned and openly humiliated. What's more, he was unemployed.

When I met Pastor Steve about seven years later, his attitude toward ministry was in full recovery. He and his family, along with a small nucleus of loyal holdovers from his disbanded church, had rebounded emotionally from the breakup and had started a new church in his home. They had recently purchased property in the area where, surprisingly, plans for constructing a new building were already underway. Things appeared to have finally come full circle.

As an aspiring pastor who lived in the very community where Pastor Steve ministered, I jumped on board the gravy train and volunteered my services and spiritual gifts to his upstart church. In gratitude, he offered me a pastoral-internship, which I gladly accepted. Everything seemed to be going according to plan for both of us. But when the church officially opened its doors to the community six months later, the euphoria I felt early on quickly evaporated. Something was awry.

Fashioned from his ten years of consulting with evangelical leaders across the country was his market-driven approach toward ministry. In brief, he practiced ministry not necessarily as a preacher but more as a pragmatist—with numerical growth serving as the centerpiece by which he gauged his success. It seemed to me that Pastor Steve saw both the believer and the unbeliever more as *consumers* than as sheep and goats. Thus, in his attempt to win souls and stimulate numeric growth in the church, he appealed to marketing methodology and stylized gimmickry rather than to the bold proclamation of Scripture. To seduce the unchurched seeker by way of art exhibitions, entertainment, evangelism-worship, outdoor festivals and activities, and the occasional sermon prop was his *modus operandi*. And this is where he and I differed.

My threadbare approach to ministry, sanctimonious as it may sound, leaned on the exaltation of Scripture alone—accurately teaching its theological and historical truths while extrapolating from its text the practical relevance. Market-driven methodology that packaged the gospel for the consumer was precarious to me at best and, at worst, it undercut essential biblical truths—not the least of which was the offense of a bloody cross.

On the heels of our contentious telephone exchange, it became apparent that our differences concerning the ministry were plentiful. Deep inside my heart was a siren blaring that warned of looming *compromise*. What had started out as an otherwise friendly chat had quickly devolved into a lengthy dispute over the connotations of certain words. At issue was whether or not our church website (which I personally designed under his supervision) contained terminology potentially off-putting to a

postmodern community. To Pastor Steve's way of thinking, it almost certainly did. Theological phrases I regarded as adequately descriptive, though benign, he regarded as outmoded and cancerous. He had called me at home, therefore, to request I make changes to our website immediately.

All things considered, Pastor Steve was a *very* godly man with whom I shared certain ministerial goals. Still, I wasn't buying what he was selling. I couldn't understand his allergic reaction toward classical terminology that many, including myself, proudly saluted. His objection to specific *religious* words on our *religious* website (which were meant to obviously promote our *religious* church) baffled me! For a man who supposedly prided himself on his Reformed traditions, I was stunned by his *bashfulness* toward religious verbiage.

On balance, the theological expressions contained on the church website were part and parcel with historic Protestant theology. In other words, they effectively described who we were as a body of believers. Thus, when Pastor Steve called me on that summer afternoon to object to the site's overt Christian wording, I felt like a dog who had been scolded by his master for having four legs and a wagging tail. I remember the conversation as though it occurred only yesterday.

"Hi Ron," Pastor Steve began, his voice sounding somewhat hesitant over the phone. "You did a fine job designing the church website."

His compliment seemed insincere. The tone of his voice betrayed the platitude and I could sense a big "*But*" looming around the corner. Sure enough, he continued: "*But* we need to make some changes."

I was suspicious. "What do you want to change?" I asked.

"I would like you to remove the words *evangelical* and *fundamentalist* from the site."

I swallowed hard. I could sense where this conversation was going. "I don't understand," I said. "We believe in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We hold to the fundamentals of the faith. Therefore, 'evangelical' and 'fundamentalist' captures who we are as a congregation, do they not?"

Ignoring my question, he spoke candidly: "These words, Ron, are sure to convey a certain stereotype that, although we agree with *in principle* as a church, we don't want to necessarily promote *publicly*. To do so could jeopardize our standing in the community, as well as hinder our potential growth and outreach as a church." After a momentary pause, he concluded: "Also, we need to reconsider other phrases as well, such as *orthodoxy* and *conservative*." (By "reconsider" he clearly meant 'remove altogether').

On hearing such a request, I wondered to myself how and when such celebrated words within Christendom had become taboo. "Evangelical," "orthodoxy," "fundamentalist," "conservative"—had these words been recently demoted to profanities and I just didn't get the memo? Was Pastor Steve under the romantic delusion that, were it not for the use of these so-called volatile words, irreligious and spiritually discerned people might otherwise attend our church? Were these words so inflammatory that we stood the chance of alienating ourselves from our community if we spoke them out loud or dared to publish them in writing? Even more, I marveled at Pastor Steve's glaring pretense: By admitting to being conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist *in principle*, his reluctance to identify our church with such titles *in*

*practice* qualified him—dare I say—as a hypocrite.

Although he didn't say it outright, it was clear to me that Pastor Steve didn't want the church to be type-casted. And while I can appreciate his thoughtfulness toward wanting to preserve the church from ill-conceived misconceptions, stereotypes, and preconceived notions, I couldn't help but flashback to a private meeting a few weeks earlier that only belied his good intentions. In that particular meeting, sadly, his desire to come off as palatable to visitors trumped any semblance of sound orthodoxy to believers.

I recalled from memory how I was slated to kick-start our Sunday morning service by leading our church in the morning invocation; a regular requirement and privilege I enjoyed as an intern. Only moments before assuming the podium, Pastor Steve had pulled me aside to assess the content of my opening prayer. Upon review, he suggested that I be vague in my choice of words. More specifically, he asked that I reconsider invoking the term "Holy Spirit" by name. His tone was timid but his words were direct: "You may *not* want to mention the Holy Spirit in your invocation."

I was stung by the suggestion, as it was common for me to publicly entreat God's Spirit to join us as we opened in worship. After breaking his eye-contact with me, Pastor Steve qualified his point rather sheepishly: "People may think we're *Pentecostal* or something."

The ever-growing tree of unacceptable words had sprouted a new branch. The word "evangelical" was apparently too stereotypical; "orthodoxy" too stringent; "fundamentalist" too off-putting; and I suppose "conservative" was too political. And, regretfully, the title "Holy Spirit"—the name ascribed to the third Person of our triune God—was too provocative. Why? Although Pastor Steve didn't elaborate, I can only assume that it was because he believed that prayer directed to the Spirit of God *by name* might be perceived by mainline Christians as too *charismatic* or, worse yet, too *esoteric* for the sensibilities of irreligious seekers. Accordingly, the phrase "Holy Spirit" was added to the dastardly list of words to be stricken from the record.

Returning my thoughts to our telephone chat about the church website, I went outside into the humid New England afternoon to lick my wounds and collect my emotions. My mind was racing. Was our disagreement over so-called dirty words on the church website indicative of a larger chasm between us? And if so, was I doing the honorable thing by serving alongside a man with whom I apparently was in violent disagreement on significant tenants of ecclesiology? Or was our squabble over the website much ado about nothing; a mundane matter of artistic difference akin to quarrelling over the color of the carpet in the church sanctuary?

Thoughts of uncertainly ricocheted in my brain as I mulled over his words. In hindsight, it wasn't his request that bothered me inasmuch as it was the *motivation* behind it. Pastor Steve wanted to *sanitize our church's appeal*; that is, to make it more alluring to the spiritually discerned. It was his goal to promote our upstart congregation to the public as a happy association of like-minded people of faith, or a contemporary family network, that disassociated itself from dusty liturgy or unfashionable orthodoxy so often connected with traditional churches. By way of our website, he instead wanted to showcase our church as a place where felt-needs were addressed and *therapy through fellowship* was offered at a premium. And what better way for a church to appear vogue, family-friendly, and cutting-edge than a flashy online presence that divorced itself from

all things too-religious or mainline denominational. To his way of thinking, our church website should be nondescript and ambiguous and thereby capable of seducing the secular internet-surfer.

Confronted with the realization that I was in league with someone who was part of the epidemic sweeping across American evangelicalism and not part of the solution, my worst fears were realized. Pastor Steve endorsed—even promulgated—a sanitized brand of Christianity; aptly called in some circles *Christianity-lite*. His philosophy of ministry was as alarming now as it was disturbing then. Veiled in his boycott of certain words was the subtle truth that our church was to remain contextually vague so as to entice curious but nonreligious visitors. (And, candidly speaking, the new church building came with a hefty mortgage that required attracting generous bodies to its seats). The great masquerade around Pastor Steve’s philosophy, in retrospect, was that it advocated feeding the sheep as the first priority, when, in actuality, recruiting and entertaining the goats was the overriding goal.

Sadly, not long after expunging our website of its dirty words, things only degenerated between Pastor Steve and me. He borrowed tactics from many popular television preachers and motivational speakers in the United States; most of whom specialized in life-navigation evangelism, individual life-coaching, self-help ideology, or felt-needs preaching. Alas, my pastor was a seeker-sensitive and Purpose-Driven preacher.

He was an ear-tickler, as the apostle Paul coined it in his day, whose pulpit messages consisted mainly of antecedents for achieving a perfect “green lawn” in our yards rather than growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. He equated numerical growth with success and once even admitted publicly that not all of Scripture—particularly the racier passages found in Leviticus 18—was suitable for teaching in public. Lost in Pastor Steve’s philosophy of ministry and pulpit sermons were the theological underpinnings that bolster Protestant Christianity; the very underpinnings we revere today and which made martyrs out of countless Christians in centuries past.

Today, the words “evangelical,” “orthodoxy,” “fundamentalist,” and “conservative” are still noticeably absent from Pastor Steve’s church website. Even more heartrending to me is the inexplicable and inexcusable omission of other historic terms equated with Christendom, not the least of which are “Jesus,” “Christ,” “holiness,” “sin,” “hell,” “heaven,” “salvation,” “baptism,” “communion,” “Holy Spirit,” and “Bible.” These buzzwords, sadly, are nowhere to be found;<sup>2</sup> apparently banished from Pastor Steve’s website lexicon lest they offend the sinner and, consequently, retard the numerical growth of the church’s membership.

## Ministry vs. Marketing

**H**ave I overreacted to Pastor Steve’s boycott of the words “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” “orthodoxy,” “conservative” and “Holy Spirit”? Is this enough indication to bring charges of “*sellout!*” against a godly man who has devoted over three decades of his life to ministry? After all, it’s not as though he’s a *heretic* going

door to door dressed in a suit and tie and a five-dollar haircut preaching a foreign gospel, right? Isn't it possible that I mistook his sensitivity to the aforementioned words as compromise when, in truth, he was simply being mindful of the sensibilities of the people he was trying to reach—that is, to meet them on their level? And wasn't his desire to adapt, or modify, our language on the website a means by which our church could comfortably fit within our environs and perhaps minister more effectively?

Furthermore, isn't Pastor Steve's principle endorsed by the apostle Paul who wrote to the Corinthians: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. ... To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. *I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some*" (1 Cor. 9:20, 22, emphasis added).

Paul's statement seems to lend some weight to Pastor Steve's method of church ministry. To imitate the world in our church services, to cater to the world on our websites and via other multimedia productions, and to use secular-friendly diplomacy to draw crowds is sure to put the church in a much better position to win the world for Christ, right? Apparently George Barna, an oft-quoted market researcher who specializes in studying the religious beliefs and behavior of Christians in America, agrees. He sees Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9 as apostolic precedent that legitimizes the seeker-friendly movement. Barna writes, "Paul ... was willing to *shape his communications* according to their needs in order to receive the response he sought."<sup>3</sup>

Have I therefore played the fool and overreacted? Are Pastor Steve and George Barna onto something here and I once again just didn't get the memo?

To begin with, it is not an overreaction to cry foul when a minister forgoes using historic, biblical terminology as an attempt to disguise truth and keep up appearances. It is disingenuous at best and heretical at worst. By shying away from controversial yet crucial expressions a pastor ultimately risks diluting the biblical message of its severity and potency. In other words, if stripped of its forceful words—particularly "hell," "eternal damnation," "outer darkness," "lake of fire," "weeping and gnashing," and "sin,"—the Good News of God's grace and forgiveness simply becomes Just News.

Moreover, once a pastor concedes to soften the Bible's unpopular vocabulary, he is only a hop, skip, and a jump away from abandoning the central point of the gospel altogether—namely, that mankind is inherently sinful; at enmity with God from birth; born as objects of His wrath; and on the pathway to hell with no hope in and of themselves. The only remediation to our condition is to fully surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ for salvation that he, alone, purchased with his atoning blood. (And this is to say nothing about the persecution and hardship that possibly awaits those who dare to take up their crosses and follow Christ in daily obedience).

Harsh terms such as "surrender," "Lordship," "enmity with God," "wrath," "obedience," and "take up your cross"—let alone "persecution" and "hardship"—are conspicuously absent from Pastor Steve's philosophy of ministry, as they are with countless seeker-sensitive and Purpose-Driven churches. Why? I would suggest it is because such terminology doesn't sell very well in marketing circles. Instead, pop-psychology laced with tickling language that espouses *cotton-candy theology* and relational counseling has become the top-selling norm.

To be clear, glossing over these particular words is not inherently sinful. But cushioning the blow of Scripture—that is, omitting specific words, phrases, or doctrines for fear that they might make attending church less inviting to unbelievers—reeks of

misguided motivation and utter faithlessness in the sovereignty of God. (Ultimately, it is God alone who calls men unto Himself according to His good purpose; not the charisma of a preacher's personality or the ear-tickling and inoffensive sales pitch of an evangelistic program).

Church ministry—to say nothing about the truth of Scripture—is inevitably distorted if it is decentralized from the biblical model found in Acts 2:42-47. The tricky teachings of Christ and the hard sayings of the New Testament writers (which address sin, judgment, hell, and several other uncomfortable biblical topics) were recorded under inspiration for our *instruction*, not for our editorial discretion (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11). A philosophy of church ministry that employs semantic gymnastics to avoid these difficulties is indeed a compromised philosophy that is wholly incompatible with apostolic teaching.

### Sterilizing The Offense Of Christianity

Christianity, at its basic root, is an offensive religion meant to prosecute an antagonistic world when its spiritual truths are accurately taught. Christ himself is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:8). The message of the cross is an impediment to some (1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11) and mere foolishness to others (1 Cor. 1:23). This sad truth should not surprise even the most juvenile student of Scripture. Paul acknowledges that “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Can we really expect the world not to take offense if we preach the unadulterated truth of the gospel? Arthur Pink notes, “Faithful preaching will render the minister unpopular, and will ‘empty’ churches—not *fill* them!”<sup>4</sup>

If an unspiritual world is not affronted by our preaching then the logical conclusion from Scripture is that we’re *not* preaching the *true* gospel. For the Bible bites with sharp teeth the spiritually discerned; the cross cuts with its jagged edges the criminally guilty; and the holiness of God repels the carnal mind. When taught truthfully, no amount of immunization or sanitization can dull the Bible’s fangs. We shouldn’t expect, therefore, anything less from the world than a hostile response. The great Reformer Martin Luther once remarked that wherever the authentic gospel is preached in its purity the natural byproduct will be conflict and controversy. In that vein, R. C. Sproul observes:

That we enjoy relative safety from violent attacks against us may indicate a maturing of modern civilization with respect to religious toleration. *Or it may indicate that we have so compromised the gospel that we no longer provoke the conflict that true faith engenders* (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

Glossing over biblical truth and terminology for palatability sake is not only a shameful betrayal of the Church’s call of duty but flies in the face of what Scripture teaches about the nature of unredeemed man. In effect, no amount of whitewashing can

make an offensive gospel inoffensive to an unregenerate mind save the convenient work of the Holy Spirit. This hard truth is not a supposition or some denominational bylaw; it's a biblical fact.

Moreover, preaching a sanitized gospel that's rooted in a seeker-sensitive philosophy of ministry insults God. It suggests a serious lack of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to draw and convict sinners by the preached Word alone. Regrettably, Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive pastors, by virtue of their made-made methodology, show themselves to be more faithful at marketing than they are at preaching. In the end, Scripture describes those ministers who dumb-down the gospel as those who have "a form of godliness, although they have denied its power" (2 Tim. 3:5).

### The Duty Of A Christian Minister

**B**ecause it's uncharitable to paint with a broad brush, I do not wish to overstep my bounds and indict all of modern evangelicalism. I recognize, even champion, that a blend of traditionalism and modernity in church ministry is comparable to "the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom *new* treasures as well as *old*" (Matt. 13:52, emphasis added). Yet pastors like Pastor Steve who offer an innocuous version of Christianity—under the guise of modernity—must be examined in light of what the Bible teaches about leaders. If not corrected, the consequences are gloomy: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers," James writes, "because you know that *we who teach will be judged more strictly*" (James 3:1, emphasis added).

The Bible clearly distinguishes between God's expectations for the sheep and His higher expectations for those He has called to shepherd the sheep. As an individual *sheep*, Pastor Steve is virtually without equal in my experience. To him I owe an invaluable debt for influencing me in certain spiritual disciplines that went unnoticed or suppressed in my own life. But as *shepherds*, God has called Pastor Steve and me to a higher standard of Biblicism, as James cautions, which transcends mere ethics, virtue, and morality. We have a responsibility to preach the whole counsel of Scripture—the good, the bad, and the ugly (2 Tim. 4:2).

Those who pontificate *Christianity-lite* from the pulpit week after week fail to meet this standard of excellence; a standard clearly rooted in the Mosaic Law that charges shepherds to speak out about that which is holy and about that which is common. It leaves little room for linguistic compromise of the Bible or its message:

"Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored. ... You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, *and you must teach ... all the decrees [of] the Lord ...*" (Lev. 10:3, 10–11, emphasis added).

Soft-pedaling Christian colloquialisms for marketability-sake *always* leads to further compromise down the road. When biblical language is bargained, its doctrines soon follow suit. As the recent history of some of our mainline denominations readily



reveal, the Bible's spiritual absolutes become conveniently passé and the decrees of God are ultimately marginalized when the full-weight of the Bible's language is abandoned.

I can recall on one occasion, for example, when Pastor Steve wanted to launch a series of weekly Bible study groups in the private homes of church members. As the church intern with a degree in biblical theology, I was excited about the opportunity to lead a small band of people deep into the recesses of the Word of God.

You can imagine my displeasure, however, when Pastor Steve insisted that we refrain from calling our groups "Bible Studies." Instead, we were instructed to use the market-friendly moniker "Care Groups." His reasoning was clear, if not unfortunate. Apparently, the latter term carried a softer connotation that would appeal to the felt-needs of individuals who desired fellowship, acceptance, and emotional healing. The former, however, was seen as too cold, sterile, inflexible, and academic. As a result, what was meant in theory to be Bible studies was, in practice, nothing more than group therapy centered on abstract questions provided in advance by Pastor Steve. To his way of thinking, renaming the Bible study groups to "Care Groups" was a ploy to disarm those less-inclined to participate.

### **Was The Apostle Paul Purpose-Driven & Seeker-Sensitive?**

**W**hat about the charge that the apostle Paul was seeker-sensitive? His statement in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 is often used to support the allegation. In fact, by implication, George Barna exonerates Pastor Steve and likeminded ministers by extrapolating from Paul's words the necessary justification to water-down the gospel for easier consumption. Yet before we concede to Barna's proposition and let Pastor Steve and his ilk off the hook, let's allow the apostle Paul to speak for himself in sum:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:20-23).

Was Paul's attitude toward evangelism in 1 Corinthians 9 pragmatic at its core? Did he in fact model for us how to go about customizing Christianity so as to make it digestible to an unbelieving recipient? Moreover, as one theologian asked, "Was the apostle Paul suggesting that the gospel message can be made to appeal to people by accommodating their relish for certain amusements or by pampering their pet vices?"<sup>6</sup>

The apostle Paul did not endorse softening the Christian message or the language of Scripture to appease his own countrymen or to bait the pagan Greeks to whom he ministered. Although he always aimed to personally connect with his audience, as 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 readily states, he utterly deplored any attempt to remove the

offense of the gospel. Tickling the ears of potential converts in order to earn an audience was not what he had in mind. He didn't look to please his enemies for the purpose of winning their esteem nor did he try to make the gospel more pleasing to its skeptics. To the Galatians, he spoke in frank terms:

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 about transforming himself to accommodate his audiences, whether Jewish or Gentile, had little to do with compromising Christian principles and the message he preached and everything to do with *personal sacrifice*. In other words, he was not describing his willingness to sacrifice the message, but his willingness to sacrifice himself to preach the message. He was describing an attitude of personal sacrifice, not Scriptural compromise. Donald Stamps notes the following:

What he affirms is that he is prepared to conform to the convictions of those whom he is trying to help, *provided Christian principles are not violated*. He understands that if he offends others by disregarding the conviction of their conscience, his ministry to them for Christ's sake could be seriously hindered (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

## Religious Profanities

I readily concede that words such as “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” do indeed have a stinging bite in today's post-9/11 world; a bite, no doubt, that was virtually nonexistent thirty-five years ago. Therefore, I can understand why the fear of being stigmatized might cause someone like Pastor Steve to take pause. But one's attitude toward these particular words often reveals their outlook toward the Bible as a whole and belies their faith in God's sovereignty in evangelism and salvation.

Moreover, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its deadly ties to international terrorism, many people mentally link “fundamentalist” to a militaristic sorority of Qur'an-carrying fanatics and suicide bombers willing to die violent deaths for their religion. Consequently, many in the West choke on the word “fundamentalist.”

Similarly, inside the continental U.S., the word “evangelical” is all too often associated—*not* with its historical meaning which denotes an individual who upholds the Bible as the inspired Word of God and promotes a *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ<sup>8</sup>—but with a politically active, self-righteous, and homophobic faction of pro-life activists within the conservative branch of the Grand Old Party of American politics.

These alternative connotations do indeed exist, unfortunately, owing to the lunatics, liars, and legalists who have hijacked their meaning and to pop-culture and political punditry that coin their redefinitions. But the Church has a duty to call its own back to a proper and reverent understanding of its vocabulary. Evangelizing the world

with biblical words—no matter how offensive one might receive it—conveys not only our confidence and Scriptural maturity but also our spiritual *authority*.

Seeker-sensitive pastors and Purpose-Driven churches who abandon biblical rhetoric for fear it might pigeonhole their ministry in a postmodern society show themselves to be market-minded more so than biblically minded. They rewrite the Bible with a wink and a cheeky smile and do a disservice to the sheep they are required to feed (and the goats who sit unmoved in their pews). Before a watching world these pastors blush over the language of Scripture and offer apologies for the cultural division it causes. Thus, by their color they show themselves to be ashamed of the gospel and at enmity with authentic, biblical church ministry.

We would do well to once again recall the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians: “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in *spiritual words*” (1 Cor. 2:13, emphasis added).

In other words, both the thoughts and the language of the Bible were inspired by the Spirit of God. Padding the brute force of Scripture’s inspired language for fear it will sour the appeal of Christianity to unbelievers is an act of faithlessness that betrays the words of the Lord. Through Isaiah He promised, “My word ... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11).

Do Purpose-Driven pastors and seeker-sensitive speakers *really* believe Isaiah’s words? Do they really believe that the untainted, unedited Word of God has the power to impact lives without failure and without first having to water it down to make it easier to swallow?

There is little doubt that our fallen human nature can adversely affect our church’s philosophy of ministry, and no church is immune to it. More times than not it seems we are inclined to take the path of least resistance in our approach to evangelism and to choose a marketing method people will find more titillating than the unadulterated preaching of Holy Writ. But when we anesthetize our message of its sting, we run the risk as churchmen of dishonoring the very God we are consecrated to serve. Moreover, we show ourselves to be dishonest to the sheep we are called to shepherd. By dumbing-down the Bible we come perilously close to deceivers. Let Bible-teachers be warned: “The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful” (Prov. 12:22)

There is no excuse for curtailing the Bible’s terminology or doctrine. It is God alone who is ultimately responsible for the success of a church’s outreach program. He is the Master-Evangelizer. It is He who provides the growth (1 Cor. 3:6–7). Let us therefore speak boldly in the power of the Holy Spirit and with the full arsenal of God’s Word at our hip. He’ll take care of the rest, no matter how haphazard or seductive our ministry philosophy might be and no matter how offensive the world might regard our language. The Bible and its Author can speak for themselves.

—Ronald H. Gann

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<sup>1</sup> I have opted to use “Pastor Steve” as a pseudonym to respect his identity.

<sup>2</sup> The doctrinal statement on Pastor Steve’s website does include some basic biblical terminology, but only after I insisted that a doctrinal statement be included on the website.

<sup>3</sup> George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 33; as cited in John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Chicago, IL Crossway Books, 1993), 90.

<sup>4</sup> As cited in *Today’s Puritan Audio Devotional*; “Do not be proud of your fine feathers”; Thomas Watson. March 6, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Books, 1997), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 90.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Stamps, ed. *Full Life Study Bible* (Life Publishers, 1992), 1763; 1 Cor. 9:19 note

<sup>8</sup> Defining the word “evangelical” has been open to a wide variety of interpretation in the past decade or so. This definition, therefore, is my own and seems in line with the historic understanding of the term.