

# Market and Mission: Competing Visions for Transforming Ministry

Hickman Lecture, Duke Divinity School

October 16, 2001

Kenneth L. Carder, Bishop

Mississippi Area, The United Methodist Church

The most pervasive logic or vision for ministry today is shaped by the market and the values of consumerism rather than by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The global market economy has become the dominant god of the modern world, not the vulnerable, liberating and suffering God of the Exodus and of the Cross. The myths, rituals, and methods of the consumerist driven market have now invaded the church, been baptized by the church, ritualized by the church until the message of the gospel is so filtered through the consumerism of the global market that the Gospel of Jesus Christ itself has become another commodity to be exchanged for self-fulfillment, personal success, institutional advancement, and now even national security.

That is my thesis this morning. I may over state the situation. But I invite you to think with me about our vision for ministry and the framework and foundation out of which our ministries and our church's life are shaped.

John Cobb, in a lecture at Vanderbilt in 1994 stated that a thousand years ago the dominant religion (logic or framework or world view) was *religion*.<sup>1</sup> People identified themselves as Christians, or Jews, or Muslims. That was the primary source of their identity. The great wars were fought over religion, the Crusades being an example. Religionism, as Cobb calls it, wrought many horrors in Europe and lasted through the first half of the seventeenth century. Religionism gradually gave way to *nationalism* as the true religion of the Western world. Identity became rooted in national loyalties. People shifted their fundamental loyalty from being Calvinist, Catholic, Lutheran, or Anabaptist to being German, English, French, or Dutch. From the middle of the seventeenth century until the end of World War II, nationalism was the dominant rationale for war and the sources of security, identity, and status. As Cobb says, “. . . nationalism became the central commitment: what people were willing to die for, what they fought wars over, what determined their relationships to their neighbor.”<sup>2</sup> Dr. Cobb contends that after World War II it became less effective to appeal to national loyalties in the way that had been done for two hundred years prior to that time.

Cobb concludes that the dominant religion of the latter half of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century is *economism*. The major institutions created after World War II to manage the affairs of the world are oriented to economics--the European Economic Community, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, NAFTA, etc. Summits are held around economics. Wars are fought over economic interests and military and political resources focus on economic security.

Cobb's analysis may be an over simplification, but few can question the enormous preoccupation with economics in today's world. The market is a prevailing center of power. The perceived power of any institution is measured partly by the attacks upon it. The targets of the September 11 terrorist attacks were symbols of the three dominant sources of security and identity in America: the World Trade Center, with the towers penetrating the heavens; the Pentagon, the center of military strength, presumed to be impenetrable; the White House or Capitol, the signs of government and law.

The fact that the churches were not on the terrorists' list may indicate the loss of the church's power. During the civil rights movement some African American houses of worship were bombed because of the power flowing from them. However, today the church has been flattered and manipulated into becoming the sacralizing agent for the prevailing consumerist culture. The use of the church as a base for resurgent patriotism in support of the 'war against terrorism' and the recent 'faith-based initiative' are only two examples of a church tempted to substitute the temporary power of consumer appeal for the alternative power of the Cross. The civil rights workers came to the church in order to clarify and strengthen their vision of God's reign of justice, compassion, generosity and non-violence and to pray for courage to live that vision in the streets.

The roots of the market idolatry run deep into our history as Methodists. John Wesley knew the dangers. In "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" and other sermons Wesley warned that wealth changes our logic, our frame of reference. As wealth increases our dependency upon grace decreases. The availability of financial resources increases our options, gives us a false sense of self-sufficiency and security. Wesley warned that Christianity makes us diligent and frugal and as we become diligent and frugal we tend to become more wealthy. As wealth increases dependency upon and awareness of grace diminishes, options multiply, and priorities change.

The institutional manifestations of Wesley's warning took on visible validity in the American Church. More than the Methodists were affected. Lawrence Moore, Professor of History at Cornell University, contends that what we usually mean by secularization has to do not so much with the disappearance of religion but its commodification.<sup>3</sup> That is, religion has ceased to be the basic framework through which we as a people view the world and has become another optional commodity in which we participate or which we consume depending upon our choices and desires. He roots the process of religious commodification in the First Amendment itself which helped to create an environment of competition among denominations. He quotes Peter Berger, "The pluralistic situation is above all a market situation. In it religious institutions become consumer commodities. And . . . a good deal of religious activity comes to be dominated by the logic of market economies."<sup>4</sup>

Nathan Hatch, a church historian who teaches at Notre Dame, makes the case that Methodism's rapid growth on the American frontier was influenced by its effectiveness in articulating and adapting to the prime cultural values of individualism and capitalism. More than other

denominations, we went where the people were and we incorporated the rising tide of individualism and free enterprise into our religious motivations and practices. Hatch writes: “It is the meteoric rise of American Methodism that offers insight into a society that was awash in religion and in making money--and confidence of divine favor upon both endeavors. American Methodism was the prototype of a religious organization taking on market form.”<sup>5</sup>

Further, revivalism with its dominant message of individual salvation, often at the expense of the social and communal dimensions of the gospel, contributed to the uncritical adoption of the market logic as the architect of the church’s life and ministry. Preaching for individual conversions was seen as more central to the gospel than shaping communities that are a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God’s transformation of the world into the mind of Christ.

David Hampton writes in *Methodism and The Shaping of American Culture*: “The Methodists not only engaged in cutthroat competition with the Baptists and other popular enthusiasts for the souls of the masses, but the very fact of doing so, in the words of Laurence Moore, ‘committed revivalism to a market logic and ultimately to market strategies.’”<sup>6</sup>

The market has its place. Every society must have a market system by which persons have access to goods and services. A method of exchange is necessary. There are definite benefits to the market so long as we keep clear that an economy exists to serve people and not the other way around. Of course, there is no “pure” system such as capitalism, socialism, or communism. Today’s economies are combinations and modifications of diverse systems. But the dominant system today is free enterprise capitalism built upon consumption, competition, and commodity exchange. The problem is that the market logic shapes more than the market. It shapes our whole world view and thereby becomes god. As Luther reminds us, whatever our hearts cling to is our god. Whatever shapes our lives, whatever lense through which we view the world and its events, whatever we look to for identity and security and transformation is our god. I contend that consumerism has become the god of the contemporary church and is now the guiding vision of ministry.

The myths or principles that undergird and shape life are evidences of our god. What are the underlying myths or tenets of faith of the market as contrasted with the gospel:

1. The market logic presumes scarcity while the gospel presumes abundance when the righteousness of God is present.
2. The market measures worth on the basis of its exchange power, while the gospel measures worth in relationship with God’s gift and call.
3. The market deals in commodities; the gospel focuses on creation and gift.
4. The market depends upon consumption and growth; the gospel depends upon relationships and intrinsic value.
5. The market places prime value on efficiency and measurable results; the gospel places prime value on faithfulness to Jesus Christ.
6. The market runs by exchange; the gospel operates by mutuality and shared gift.
7. The market is driven by self-identified needs; the gospel invites participation in God’s

mission.

Evidences of the market's consumerist logic shaping the church abound. Theology has been replaced by sociology, psychology, and marketing techniques as foundational. Pastors look to such disciplines to inform their ministries rather than to theology, church history, or biblical studies. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Exodus, the God of Miriam, Rahab, Elizabeth and Mary, the God who was in Christ, the Crucified God, has become unnecessary, maybe even a hindrance, to institutional church growth. Leadership in the church now is defined in terms of institutional management and advancement, rather than as a serendipity of discipleship of Jesus Christ. God has now become another commodity to be marketed by the church in the market place of ideas and experiences; rather than the Holy Other or the *Mysterium Tremendum* before whom the entire cosmos stands in awe, wonder, judgment, and grace.

No where is this more evident than in the church's worship. Worship is now a marketing strategy by which persons are recruited to a religious shopping mall called *church*. The element of transcendence has been replaced with a folksy, feel good, rootless form of entertainment, designed to respond to the self-identified needs of the shopper, looking for 'meaning' or 'purpose' or 'community' or 'excitement' or a way to fill up a life already satiated by the market's ever expanding promise of satisfaction through consumption. Worship shaped and driven by anthropology rather than theology ceases to be worship and becomes a commodity consumed by customers.

Evangelism has become synonymous with marketing and institutional expansion. Rather than the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as the Lord and Savior of the cosmos, evangelism has been reduced to a political code word or a not so veiled membership recruitment ploy designed on the principle of 'bait and switch.' "Get them into the church by whatever means, including the market exchange logic, and then we will share with them the logic of grace." We fail to realize that the medium by which we attract the masses may prevent them from hearing the message. When do the customers recruited by the market become disciples transformed by Jesus Christ, especially if the church itself looks and acts more like the shopping mall than it looks and acts like a cross-bearing, scarred but risen Christ? Is salvation now limited to joining the church? If so, we have sold our soteriology and our ecclesiology for a mess of sweet-tasting artery-clogging pottage.

Ministry itself is being transformed into a commodity, exchanged in the religious market. Our Methodist itinerant system, born in mission, has been hijacked, commandeered by the pervasive values of consumerism. Congregations see themselves as consumers of ministry and the pastor as the dispenser of the religious wares. Morale and motivation among pastors are largely dependent upon market forces of salary and institutional advancement, rather than sharing in God's mission in the world. Competition replaces connection rooted in covenant. Successful ministry is measured by the same standards as success in the corporate world of the market--salary, benefits, upward mobility, ranking with co-workers. The appointive itinerant system is almost paralyzed by the multiple market-driven demands placed upon it by pastors and congregations. Consultation

resembles contract negotiations more than strategy for missional deployment. The result is that ministers become hirelings who use the sheep, especially those in small congregations, as stepping stones in career advancement. Laity choose churches on basis of need fulfillment rather than a context for being in ministry. They look to clergy and the church to meet their self-identified wants that masquerade as needs. Failure to fulfill the needs will result in a request for a new pastor, or a shopping trip to a nearby religious outlet. “Find a need and meet it” becomes the operating philosophy and takes precedence over “announce God’s reign and live it.”

John Wesley knew the difference between a ministry shaped by the market and one shaped by mission. He refers to a minister who moves from a parish worth 50 pounds to one paying 100. It sounds all too familiar:

Why does he go thither? “To get more money.” A tolerable reason for driving a herd of bullocks to one market rather than the other . . . .But what reason for leaving the immortal souls over whom the Holy Ghost had made you overseer! And yet this is the motive which not only influences in secret, but is acknowledged openly and without blush! Nay, it is excused, justified, defended; and that not by a few, here and there, who are apparently void both of piety and shame; but by numbers of seemingly religious [men], from one end of England to the other.<sup>7</sup>

In a market-shaped church all activities are optional and depend on “what the market will bare.” Discipleship and mission and Christian education are among the options on the smorgasbord of the week’s activities, along with volley ball, trips to Disney World, patriotic concerts, and discussion of the latest book by a popular guru. Only activities for which sufficient numbers of people can be recruited to pay are deemed essential. Discipleship and mission are thereby democratized and subject to individual tastes and personal preferences. Little wonder that few respond to an invitation to take up a cross and that the demands of gospel go unspoken and/or unheard. The God one worships is even optional with the tests being sincerity and how well God is perceived as fulfilling the consumers’ expectations.

The church’s prophetic witness is an early casualty to the consumerist god. Laurence Moore pointedly asks the right questions:

Where are the real religious prophets? Can there be any in a country whose self-image rests on fast, friendly, and guiltless consumption? It is not the taste of a Big Mac that sells it; it is the way it feeds the low-down common desire to be democratically unpretentious. Would-be religious prophets have to learn the ways of Disneyland in order to find their audience, but even that popular touch cannot give them the capacity to reach the many Americans who would feel perfectly comfortable at a prayer breakfast held under McDonald’s generous golden arches. How can the prophets among us terrify those people with an apocalyptic vision of a planet left desolate by careless stewards who have used up its fields, wasted its energy, and blackened its air and waters? How can they make them understand that when Adam and Eve broke a commandment against a forbidden consumption in the Garden of Eden, forbidden because it was needless, they

were pointing humankind toward its final agony? Probably they cannot. So we are left with nothing new under the unforgiving sun whose burning rays carry cancer and God knows what else through an ozone-depleted atmosphere.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly in Moore's view, a market shaped church provides a theological underpinning for a consumerist culture that threatens the very future of creation itself.

Is there an alternative vision? What would a ministry and a church shaped by the gospel look like? The necessity of the question is illustrative of how far we have drifted from the source of the church's ministry. Only a church adrift has to spend time defining its mission or shaping its vision. But that seems to be where we are.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHURCH AND MINISTRY SHAPED BY THE GOSPEL RATHER THAN THE MARKET**

Ministry rooted in and shaped by the gospel rather than the market-logic majors in memory. Consumerism causes amnesia and amnesia results in missional anemia. A society or church occupied with consuming forgets its story. If the story is remembered at all, it is used as an advertising tool rather than a source of identity. A church without a memory is a church that has to ask the world, "Who am I?" And its mission is whatever the prevailing culture assigns it.

Memory of THE STORY of God's redemptive acts in history and supremely in the life, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ is essential to the church's ministry. Pastors and churches who do not know THE STORY are easy prey to the pragmatic promises of prevailing fads and the paralyzing of public praise. We cannot do ministry as though there is nothing between the Book of Acts and today's church. Therefore, pastors whose ministry is shaped by mission have to know the Bible, church history, and the meaning and history of doctrine. Faithful and creative ways of telling the story are high on the priority of the pastor whose ministry is shaped by mission because preserving the collective memory of the community of Christ is part of the church's mission.

Secondly, the church and ministry built on the foundation of the gospel seeks above all else to LIVE the Jesus story. The pastor whose ministry is shaped by the gospel proclaims 'Christ in all his offices: prophet, priest, and king.'<sup>9</sup> The church is the body of Christ and is to be a visible sign of Christ's sovereignty over all creation. What does it mean to live the Jesus story in this context? That is the fundamental and prior question for every congregation and every pastor. The church's future is not secured by strategic planning processes and long-range planning based on demographic studies and marketing surveys. The church with a future is a church that knows who Jesus is, takes with utter seriousness what Jesus says, goes where Jesus goes, does what Jesus does, and loves those whom Jesus loves.

Living the Jesus story sometimes seems foolish and often contradicts the logic of the marketplace. I know a church in Nashville, Tennessee that gave away much of its land for Habitat houses because they were convinced that living the Jesus story meant providing housing for the working

poor in their neighborhood. A small group of pastors entered a covenant to share their salaries rather than compete and join the ranks of the upwardly mobile. A small church in Fulton, MS accepts as its responsibility to see that every family in the county has food to eat. Since giving itself to that mission to feed the hungry, the priorities and relationships of that congregation have been transformed. Living the Jesus story means viewing the world through the mind of Christ, seeing everything in light of the cross and resurrection. It is the mind of Christ that shapes ministry, not the forces of the market.

What does it mean to live the Jesus story where you live? Do it and your ministry and church will be transformed, for we obey our way into mission more than we think or reason our way into it. Do what Jesus says to do, go where Jesus goes, and embrace those for whom he died and your ministry will be transformed.

Third, a church and ministry that counters consumerism lives eschatologically. Hope is as essential to identity and mission as memory. We are shaped as much by our expectation as by our memory. Security rooted in upward mobility, financial holdings, cultural favoritism, and preoccupation with institutional structures only exacerbate consumerism's idolatrous grip on the church. Our security lies in what God has done in Christ, is doing, and shall do. Vision statements written for market driven purposes are powerless in confronting the principalities and powers of sin and death dominating this world. Vision rooted in God's reign of justice, compassion, generosity, and joy is more than vision. It is God's power coming toward us from out of the future.

Hope, Christian hope, does not come from positive thinking. It is not rooted in anything we do or own or know. Hope lies in what God has done, is doing, and will do! Hope is the assurance that the decisive victory over sin and death has already been won in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can live the Jesus story because we have been incorporated into it and we know it is the shape of the future.

Fourth, the church or ministry shaped by the gospel points beyond itself to the reign of God and calls laity to vocation as ministry. In a consumer driven and shaped church, the institutional church is treated as ultimate when it is called to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of that which is Ultimate, the reign of God in Jesus Christ. The church is not the object of God's mission; it is an instrument of God's mission. Therefore, the role of laity is not primarily that of serving the institutional needs of the institution, but to be the church in the world where they work and live.

A church and ministry shaped by God's mission invites laity to be part of what God is doing and where God is doing it. The current practice of locating and building churches by consumerist marketing strategies must be replaced with churches built around missional initiatives and strategies. One radical but necessary component is changing the entire motivation for church membership. Church membership built upon need fulfillment must be countered by an invitation to participate in Christ's mission. "Going where the people are" is no strategy for church extension, especially when it results in the church acquiescing to racism and classism. Too often "going where the people are" means going where certain people are. "Going where Jesus is and where

Jesus goes” means less construction of opulent, capital intensive buildings in the suburbs and returning laity to now empty inner city churches surrounded by marginalized and vulnerable people with whom Jesus so closely identifies that what is done to them is done to him. Let us restore the connection in our connectional eccesiology and replace clergy competition based on consumerism with covenant based on a Christ’s call and mission.

## **STEPS IN MOVING FROM MARKET TO MISSION**

How do we move from a ministry shaped by consumerism to a ministry shaped by mission? Time does not permit an exhaustive treatment of the steps needed in order to counter consumerism as the prevailing influence. It will likely take at least a generation for the changes to take place. However, here are some specific suggestions.

Pastors and church leaders must immediately recover the teaching office and focus on what Wesley admonished in his sermon, “On the Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity.” As Randy Maddox reminded a Task Force of bishops, theologians and seminary leaders, and staff members of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, fulfilling the mission of the church requires, in the Wesleyan tradition, a focus on doctrine, discipline, self-denial.<sup>10</sup> Doctrine and theological reflection as foundational to the church’s life and the clergy’s leadership is essential if the church is to provide an alternative to the pervasive influence of the consumerist logic. Pastor’s and church leaders must provide theological critique of prevailing culture rather than be subsumed by it. The formational purpose of doctrine and theology must move from the periphery to the center of the church’s life.

Further, disciplines and practices that sustain an alternative community merit attention. Accountable discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition is one means of freeing the church and the ministry from its consumerist captivity. Holding one another accountable for acts of devotion, worship, compassion, and justice will enable us to grow in our own discipleship and will help overcome our isolation by shifting from competition to covenant as a basis for relationship. Intentional practicing the Wesleyan means of grace will counter the habits of consumerism-private and communal prayer, worship, Eucharist, ‘conferencing’, searching the scriptures, fasting, and sustained relationships with people in poverty. Organizing the church’s life around the rhythm of gospel rather than the rhythm of the marketplace will create a foundation for mission and engagement in the world.

Immediate and serious theological critique of current church practices and structures in the light of THE STORY of God’s mission to redeem and transform the world into the likeness of Jesus Christ is required. High on the list for critique are these: the system of compensation of pastors, board and agency personnel, seminary faculty and administrators, and all church leaders; the itinerant appointive system with its accompanying evaluation and consultation processes; the design of services of worship; the meaning and practice of evangelism; the ministry of the laity, with special attention to their vocational calling and their pastoral role; capital intensive building programs and new church development strategies that capitulate to racism, classism, and

homogeneity; and the role of theological education and judicatories in the lifelong formation and support of leaders shaped by mission rather than the market.

## CONCLUSION

The challenge of moving from market-driven ministry to mission-driven ministry means confronting the principalities and powers of this world. We cannot do it within ourselves. To attempt to do so would be to live in accordance with the market's logic of self-sufficiency. Our hope, however, lies outside market forces. Our hope lies in what God has done, is doing, and shall do. THE STORY that shapes the church includes the assurance that the decisive victory over the principalities and powers of this world has already been won. In Jesus Christ God took on the forces of sin and death and in the Crucifixion and Resurrection God delivered a foretaste of the future. God's reign will come to completion and it will look like Jesus Christ. We, therefore, can confront the pervasive forces of consumerism and live the Jesus Story with hope and confidence. In so doing, the church will be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's mission, rather than the market! May it be so today where you live and minister!

---

-

---

1. John Cobb, "For the Sake of the World," *The Spire*, Vanderbilt Divinity School and Oberlin Graduate School of Theology, Vol. 16, No. 1, Winter 1994, pp.19-21.

2. Cobb, *ibid*, p.20.

3. R. Lawrence Moore, *Selling God* (New York: Oxford Press, 1994), p.5.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

5. Nathan Hatch and John H. Wigger, editors, *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 38.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

7. Quoted by Richard Heitzenrater in unpublished manuscript, "Take thou authority": Ministerial Leadership in the Wesleyan Tradition.

8. Moore, *op. cit.* 276.

---

9. See Wesley's sermon, "The Law Established through Faith, Discourse II," where he vigorously argues that preaching Christ means "preaching all things whatsoever he hath revealed." Also, Wesley warned against the so-called 'Gospel Ministers' who preached the promises of Christ without proclaiming the commands of Christ.

10. Unpublished paper, "Wesley's Prescription for 'Making Disciples of Jesus Christ': Insights for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church."