

# *The Law of Diminishing Returns*

Once upon a time in the land of Happy Dreams, there was a church – the Traditional Church – which woke up to the worrying discovery that it was not attracting attendees and holding them as much as it used to.<sup>1</sup> The management board came up with a solution.

In three parts.

*First*, the name. From now on the church would be known as the Bright Yungthings Community Centre. Much more inviting.

*Secondly*, the management knew that the problem was not really in the name. The truth is, prospective consumers didn't want to be confronted, confronted with their sin, the wrath of God, their utter ruin and helplessness to save themselves, and, above all, the eternal consequence of all that. So, the Bright Yungthings Community Centre would, in future, assure prospective attendees that they were indeed in serious trouble and needed 'salvation', and that Jesus would indeed 'save' them – save them from their fears, anxieties, worries, hang-ups and so on, and give them a sense of personal fulfilment, but as for confronting them with 'difficult' terms like 'sin' and 'the wrath of God', that, from now on, was, if not entirely out of the question, certainly going to be muted. Putting people off by confronting them with unpalatable truths? No more of that!

*Thirdly*, the management consulted pagan organisations which had successfully worked out how to attract consumers – TV, shopping malls, sports organisers, and the like – and cherry-picked the best bits of advice they could lay their hands on.

And so the Bright Yungthings Community Centre set out on its new course. And it worked! It worked a treat! The seats were soon filled, the walls were bulging at the seams...

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<sup>1</sup> For justification of my approach in this article, see 'The Weapon of Humour' in my *Battle for the Church: 1577-1644*.

But, alas, as is the way of things, high summer turned to dying autumn, followed by bitter winter in the land of Happy Dreams, and consumers began to drift away from the Bright Yungthings Community Centre.

Why?

The consumers found that the Slicker Community Centre – just a short car-ride down the road – was offering better fare: better coffee, better music, better lighting, and the like. Naturally, since it was the goodies that had attracted them in the first place, many consumers upped-sticks, switched churches, and set about having a happier time in the new place.

But in due course Slicker found the same as Bright Yungthings: despite the excitement, warm ambience, and the coffee on tap, the consumers could never quite shake off the nagging inner conviction that something was seriously wrong – wrong within, wrong within themselves. As much as the repetitive songs might assure them that all was well and that Jesus was offering them personal satisfaction, and as often as the management kept reminding them that they had never had it so good, they could never quite eradicate the truth of God’s word. They found that in spite of the razzmatazz, they were experiencing what that word said, and:

...they [were showing] that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also [was bearing] witness, and their conflicting thoughts [were accusing or even excusing] them [in anticipation of] that day when, according to [the] gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:15-16).<sup>2</sup>

No amount of reinforcement from the opposite direction – whether from the stage, the song book, the worship group, the band, or the buzz of the coffee-sipping, cookie-crunching chatter – could quite shake off the nagging thought that they were sinners who needed to be saved; saved, not merely made to feel better

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<sup>2</sup> For the arguments behind my interpretation, see my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law* and my ‘All Men Under Law’.

about themselves, but really delivered from their sin – its guilt, condemnation, power and presence. They could not put it into words, but they knew it right enough. They felt it.

So much so, notwithstanding all the efforts to make the gospel palatable to the natural man and woman, the customers were nauseated by the relentless stream of psycho-babble washing over them.<sup>3</sup> The continual coffee and cup-cakes, the drumming of the band, the repeating of the songs, the bland, cheesy assurances from the pep talks, and all the rest of it, palled – and worse. And so they threw in the towel. They quitted church altogether and took their custom elsewhere, back to where there would be no Jesus talk. Pagan culture welcomed back those that it had lost.

And thus the churches in the land of Happy Dreams experienced the law of diminishing returns: dumb down the gospel to attract consumers, give the customers what they want, and in so doing you inevitably sow the seeds of your own ruin. The people of the land of Happy Dreams proved the biblical truth:

God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (Gal. 6:7-8).

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<sup>3</sup> I get the very strong impression that many evangelicals have been heavily influenced by the way TV pundits commenting on politics, sport, or whatever, spend so much time analysing motives, feelings, fears and all the rest, often trotting out their favourite bit of psycho-babble.