

## Grocery Stores and Churches

For a few years now I have been having discussions with colleagues about the way the church is perceived by those who regularly attend worship services. We have concluded that there is a parallel between where we choose to shop for groceries and what church we choose to attend.

In the years before cars, when walking and horses were the ready means of transportation, the local general store was the place where people gathered and shopped. It served as a kind of community centre. Churches also served the same purpose, providing the community with a place to gather, even while calling them to faith and faithfulness.

When cars became commonplace, the local general store lost its appeal. People would travel to a larger centre to shop at a larger store with more variety and better prices. By and large people remained committed to a particular store because it was familiar, and they still felt a personal connection. It would take something significant for someone to change stores. People began to treat their churches in the same way. Instead of attending the church down the street, they would be willing to drive a significant distance to attend one that was more to their liking. The churches tended to be larger but not so large that you couldn't know everyone there. Community remained an important aspect of belonging to a church and, generally, people were committed to a particular church, and they would attend faithfully.

Small town grocery stores were replaced by big box stores where the shopper could find better prices and an even greater variety. People chose grocery stores because the store served their needs (and wants) the best. Commitment to a particular store waned because there was no personal connection. Churches soon followed with "big box" churches springing up in larger communities, and people would choose a church entirely on the basis of what it offered to them or (more often) their children and youth. Because of the size of the church, the feeling of it being a community disappeared sometimes almost entirely, and the connection that had been experienced before was weakened. People began to move more readily between churches.

But big box stores do not have the popularity they once had. On-line stores have taken a huge bite out of the market share of brick and mortar stores, for people can browse the selections and find the best price from the comfort of their own home. Already before COVID there was a movement toward people watching worship services on-line, often not really knowing anyone else who was "worshipping" with them. People today can and do choose what they watch based entirely on their preferences, and it is easy to switch out one worship service for another.

Churches and their leadership have responded to the changing culture. Realizing that many of those in attendance had become quite consumeristic, many churches developed methods by which they could attract the greatest number of attenders, or, to put it in business terms, the greatest market share. Getting the numbers up and keeping them high has been one of the main focuses of many churches, and they will do just about anything to keep them high, including adapting their message so that it become more likable to more people. In some churches, the Sunday morning sermon has become quite similar to a

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motivational talk, with the exception that sometimes there is reference to a passage of Scripture, more as a proof-text than as the foundation for the message.

I have wondered with my colleagues about what will happen next. There is a trend for people to “shop local,” being willing to pay a little more for the same product. People shop local for all kinds of reasons: they know the producer; they are concerned about the environment; they don’t like big businesses; they don’t trust that the product is safe. In other words, shopping local can be almost as self-seeking as trying to get the best bargain on-line. Without a doubt we will see churches positioning themselves as the “local option” to appeal to the kind of person that likes that option.

Where does the problem lie? We might identify the problem with the fact that people view churches as being a kind of business. We are taught to be consumers by almost everything we see, so it is understandable that we view the church as something that can provide something we can consume. “We want to be fed,” is what we hear so often, and that can be a good sentiment, to a certain extent. Perhaps the problem is with the people, but the solution lies elsewhere. Any time a church positions itself to be what people want, it is in danger of losing its understanding of being what people need. The church’s purpose is not to bring people through the doors, but, rather, to bring people to faith in Christ and faithfulness to him with the intent that those same people bring Christ to the world. People are always going to be influenced by their environment and our environment makes us consumers, but that does not mean that a church needs to meet their demands.

We do have a responsibility in this, and it is quite simple: we need to assess ourselves and ask the question, “Am I a consumer when it comes to my choice of church?” I should note when someone changes the church they attend, it may not be because they are acting like consumers. Perhaps there are other good reasons for the change, but if the change is motivated by consumeristic feelings, then the person has failed to understand the purpose of the church. More importantly, we should never expect a church to shape its practices so that it bends the knee to consumerism. As soon as a “greater market share” becomes what motivates a church, we can also expect to see compromise. The role of the church is to be a faith community wherein which its members are equipped to be Christ’s workers in his kingdom.

Perhaps it would be best to understand the church to be a kind of training centre where we learn the skill of following Jesus Christ rather than a grocery store where we seek what satisfies our wants.

*Pastor Gary*