

Book Review

The Market Driven Church: The Worldly Influence of Modern Culture on the Church in America

By Udo W. Middelmann (Crossway Books 2004)

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Overview

The Market Driven Church: The Worldly Influence of Modern Culture on the Church in America by Udo W. Middelmann (Crossway Books, 2004) provides a critical examination of modern American Christianity by a European outsider who was educated in America. The book is a somewhat repetitive, somewhat disjointed set of rather disparaging philosophical or sociological essays covering a broad array of issues.

The Market Driven Church brings out many important points, but it is often boring, merely rehashing older motifs of other authors. In the early chapters, Middlemann finds the exceptional nature of American life to be remarkable in many ways to outsiders and revolting in others. But his perception is hardly new. Seymour Martin Lipset notes the same thing in *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (2003), *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (2001), *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (1997), and *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (1991). Middleman's evident mentor Francis A. Schaeffer decried the decline of Western civilization and American Christianity in *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (1984) and *How Shall We Then Live* (1976), and Middlemann merely reiterates (or perhaps updates) his mentor's thesis.

Middlemann complains (pp. 44-46) that the Christian message no longer startles or influences, but has evolved into something merely personal that is thus always questionable by others. God finds Himself "largely shoved into the private sphere" (p. 136). Truth is reduced to individual preference, personal values and private opinions (pp. 128, 131, 199), and objective truth is abandoned (p. 144). The Gospel message is no longer an offense because few are exposed to it. Thoughtful Christians are scarcer than a century (or more) earlier, when public life was more informed by biblical thinking. Modern Christianity has become a private religion, or at best a voting block with no other signs of being a living reality in neighborhoods. Christians rarely take stands

that create a public challenge (pp. 106-107, 123) or interact with what Middlemann calls “life in the market” (p. 128). When there is political class action by Christians, it is promoted as a means to clean up messes caused by sinful behavior, although Christians’ political views are often held without rhyme or reason (p. 128).

Middlemann argues (pp. 58-61) that this personalization of Christianity has weakened Christian views of God and man’s standing before Him. Personal worldviews predominate. “Because they are right with God, they are ready to believe that they are right about everything” (p. 127). The concept of truth has been diluted like lemonade with too much water. He further contends (pp. 74-76) that common American faith tends to negate reason and is often disassociated from truth. And it is foolish to believe in something carelessly and uncritically. Faith ought not to be a blind trust. American religion is pragmatic and not necessarily according to truth (pp. 117-118).

Moreover, the sale of religious trinkets in Christian bookstores repels serious believers (p. 107). Undiscerning Christians demand immediate gratification, sensual appeals, and emotionalism. A coherent worldview has been replaced by something that resembles more of a three ring circus: “The church has become one more attraction in the market” (p. 136), an “entertaining” and “convenient commodity in the market” (p. 109), and a good marketer can sell anyone anything (p. 121). “Profit speaks, while the prophet is silenced” (p. 117). There is little intellectual curiosity. Of course, Middleman’s frequent criticism of the dearth of intellectualism among American Christians is not novel. Mark A. Noll said the same thing more vividly in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1995).

Middlemann decries America’s mall-styled churchgoing behavior too. Christians go shopping for church goods, which can be found in abundance and carefully tailored to any budget. Unlike former times, people travel great distances to buy the kind of church goods they want. As a result, the solidarity, community, and city-building aspects of church life are lost (p. 104). Churches compete like malls for people’s attention (pp. 110, 117), and outreach centers can even be found in

or near shopping malls. On the extreme end of this phenomena, seeker-sensitive churches employ techniques that lose Gospel content (pp. 118-119, 146).

Middlemann opines (p. 116) that American Christians like sports and sensually invigorating things more than intellectual and moral discussions. Just mention sports and everyone wakes up at church (p. 182), or one can use sports to break the ice at a social event (p. 183). Sports take precedence over more serious intellectual inquiry (p. 186) and people crave the distraction of sporting events (p. 196). Health, fitness and self-discovery substitute for theology (p. 194), and trump the truth (p. 179).

A step toward theological liberalism

Middlemann's thesis is slightly heretical. He, at the very least, knocks on the door of open theism. He equates historic Calvinism's view of Providence with Islamic fatalism and then bashes the straw man—a curious postulate for a man with Reformed credentials from Covenant Theological Seminary, who is also the president in an ostensibly Reformed institution like the Francis A. Schaeffer Foundation. Instead, much of what Middlemann says echoes Gregory A. Boyd, who wrote *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (2000) and *Is God to Blame? Moving Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (2003), as well as Clark H. Pinnock, editor of *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (1994). For these men, and other scholars, like Roger Olson of Baylor University, God is omnipotent, sovereign, and yet *vulnerable*. Surely, Middleman's sentiment would make Francis Schaeffer turn in his grave.

Traditional Christian doctrine holds that we live in a fallen world that is controlled by God and yet we can still grieve without contradiction. But Middlemann does not concur. "History is not a clear flow or stream of God's design and purpose" (p. 165). "God's world is spoiled. History is not holy, normal, or approved" (p. 173). "God's sovereignty in no way implies a total functional

control” (p. 175). “Prayer, like any action, changes things in history not only for us, but also for God” (p. 175). In premillennial fashion, he says that Satan is unbound (p. 176), and running amuck, surprising and thwarting even God with his wiles. In his book (pp. 152-177), Middlemann provides us with a litany of questionable, unorthodox, hyper-Arminian theological expansions.

While denying overt affiliation with openness of God theology school (pp. 167-168), Middlemann coddles its key doctrines which deny divine omniscience, admit that even God can make mistakes, and allow human or satanic actions to supplant God’s will. He denies the traditional Reformed view of God’s sovereignty and permissive will in human affairs; that both evil and good events happen according to “the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Ac. 2:23). God considers all of the works of men (Ps. 33:14-15) and He knows of their doings (Ps. 1:6; 37:18; 94:11; 138:6). Jesus says, “even the hairs of your head are numbered” (Mt. 10:30; Lk. 12:7). The psalmist prays that God would “teach us to number our days” (Ps. 90:12). Philosophical jousting notwithstanding, the Bible teaches that God is in control of history down to the details of every individual life.

Analysis and Criticism

Middlemann’s use of the word *market* in the book’s title is rather unfortunate, and its similar misuse throughout the book might indicate some subconscious or thinly-veiled Marxian underpinnings (e.g., oppression of the working class and just wages, p. 112). Middlemann does not understand what a market is or at least uses the term in an inappropriate way. He errs in personifying the market as some dreadful enemy that will bite unless charmed (cf. Ec. 10:11), leading to disastrous results for unwary suckers like modern American Christians. But the market has no mind of its own, and things like advertising cannot ultimately create consumer demand or make people immoral. Advertising encourages those who have tendencies toward the product advertised. Sin is a heart problem rather than a market problem. As Ludwig von Mises reminds us in *Human Action: A*

Treatise on Economics (1966), “profits can only be earned by providing the consumers with those things they most urgently want to use...It is not the fault of the entrepreneurs that the consumers...prefer liquor to Bibles and detective stories to serious books” (p. 299).

Just what is *the market*? It is the social and legal arrangements that facilitate or institutionalize voluntary, mutually beneficial, and peace-engendering interaction, characterized by cooperation between rivalrous individuals who are pursuing their own purposeful ends. Hence, the market fosters social advantages for Christians and non-believers alike. It is not a parasite or malady that afflicts the church. Markets do not unilaterally increase sin. They facilitate whatever social interaction that sinful people demand. Ultimately, America’s problem is not the market but rather the sinful hearts of its people.

Why should European biases about “community” and “solidarity”, largely derived from spurious notions of class struggle *a la* Marx, be accepted as biblical? Middleman gives us no compelling reason to accept them. How much weight should we give to a European criticism of American Christianity? Americans are influenced by their culture, but Europeans are too. European government schools are surely just as morally and socially repugnant as American ones. But while relatively little European church activity counters such Gospel hindrances, American Christians are leading the way with market-generated institutions—like home schooling—that counteract wayward cultural trends. Let’s be honest: what have been the great innovations of European Christianity during the last half-century? Why should American Christians admire the European model?

Just how vital is European Christianity in public life? It seems odd that this critique of American Christianity has come from a European. Are European Christians less ignorant than their American counterparts? Perhaps they are. But while Middlemann makes a big deal about American ignorance in even little things, he also displays his own. For example, the BMW model Z4 is made in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and Middlemann ridicules common American Christians for

not knowing where this important manufacture occurs. Yet he mistakenly thinks that the car is made in North Carolina (p. 182).

Middlemann says: “The church is competing in the marketplace where God and nation, faith and sales are wound together in a bundle” (p. 197). Like dying Rome, American Christianity is faltering (p. 202). American Christians are not as publicly-spirited as the Founding Fathers and many of their contemporaries were (pp. 185-186). But his views are surely doubtful and moot. It is not clear that the American church has faced mostly social decline over the last two centuries. Middlemann bemoans the church’s adaptation to modern life by becoming more effective and efficient in its culture (p. 141), but why is that adaptation insidious? Is it a bad thing to become more productive along with the rest of society? Why should we adopt Middlemann’s Amish-like position and abstain from employing technology better? In reflecting on Christianity’s decline in America, Middlemann is sad like the elderly Israelites when they saw the relative paucity of the Temple that would be rebuilt compared with the grandeur of Solomon’s Temple (Ezra 3:12). But surely his moaning is nothing more than nostalgic sentimentalism. God might just be building the Temple that He wants.

Many of the shortcomings of American Christianity that Middlemann points out are valid and his work thus has a measure of importance. Much of his book is not bad, it is just boring. Yet his whining presentation is little different than the vast array of so many popular conservatives (like William Bennett, Rush Limbaugh, Bob Jones, *et al*) who lament how American civilization and its Christianity have slipped over the years. One might agree, but so what? Let’s move on and fix the problems by finding avenues for change like home schooling. In the final analysis, Middlemann’s pessimistic moaning runs contrary to the Biblical admonition that Christians should heed: “Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For you do not inquire wisely concerning this” (Ec 7:10).