

The Intersection of Consumerism and the View of the Christian Church
in American Evangelicalism

Nathaniel Mumau

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2023

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Tyler Scarlett, D.Min.
Thesis Chair

Rod Dempsey, D.Min.
Committee Member

James H. Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

Date

Abstract

American Evangelicalism is a religious category that describes a wide variety of Christian denominations and their churches in the United States of America. Church attendance overall has declined, and rates of church membership have plummeted even faster. At the heart of this issue is a misunderstanding of the role the local church is meant to play in the lives of Christians. In modern American society, consumerism is essential to every part of living and thus has confounded the view of the church in the lives of evangelical Christians. The church is viewed as a product to be experienced and at the customer's, a perception that is exasperated by the language and philosophies of church leaders. In this thesis, the history of the Evangelicalism and consumerism in America will be examined, and their current intersection will be addressed. This will be followed by an explanation of the biblical view of church participation and the implications of consumerism's embrace by church leaders and churchgoers.

**The Intersection of Consumerism and the View of the Christian Church
in American Evangelicalism**

The history of the Christian church is extensive. Almost two millennia of development have caused the church to ebb and flow throughout different eras in different localities. The effect of these historical variables has been a wide range of adaptations of the church, its functions, and the responsibilities of the church regarding its response to secular and political developments. One of the most recent historical developments has been the ingraining of consumerism into the United States of America's cultural framework.¹ It is only within the past century that American society at large has begun participating in consumerist endeavors as a pastime or even a lifestyle rather than as a luxury. The advent of the Internet has further exacerbated the normalcy and convenience of an almost endless market with unlimited options for the American people.

A parallel development that has coincided with the dramatic explosion of consumerism as a staple of the average American experience is the reliance and emphasis on the church in society, specifically the Christian church. Christianity existed long before America was even discovered. However, the original pioneers and colonizers of the Americas were at least partially influenced by religious, Christian motivations.² Some of the earliest European immigrants were seeking to establish distinctly religious communities.³ The historical and spiritual convictions of

¹ Jonathan Levy. *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (Random House Publishing Group, 2021), 511.

² John Foster et al., "Religion and the Founding of the American Republic America as a Religious Refuge: The Seventeenth Century, Part 1," Library of Congress, June 4, 1998, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html>.

³ Ibid.

the Christian faith were tentpoles of the eventual, larger developing American zeitgeist. Initiated during the humble colonial days yet continuing into the modern era, the expectation of religious community participation revolved around local church participation.

Before mass transit, national highway networks, and the Internet were widely accessible, the local church was an institution most relevant to its community. Cities and neighborhoods had their churches, and those congregations were made up of people from the immediate, local area. As the United States developed to be more connective, it became more intriguing to venture outside of one's locality for their worship experience.⁴ More recently, the advent of the Internet in the 1990s created access to information and advertisement that thrust the experience of shopping and consuming into the typical American experience. As the norm of every aspect of life became an act of selection and consumption, this attitude has corrupted the modern American view of church attendance.⁵

In the modern era, selecting a church for involvement is akin to selecting any other product. American consumerism has caused many Christians to view their church as a collection of services primarily rather than a place to encourage other believers and carry out the Great Commission. Suppose a church does not check all the boxes of worship, small groups, child services, community, and leadership. In that case, some will pass on one church for the chance to explore another and another until, finally, the church of their appetite is discovered. At this point, the church selected resembles the buyer more than the church resembles a source of spiritual development and growth for the believer.

⁴ Stephen Hunt, *Handbook of Megachurches* (Edited by Stephen Hunt. Leiden: Brill, 2020), 24.

⁵ Matt Schmucker, "Those Toxic Non-Attendees," 9Marks, February 25, 2010, <https://www.9marks.org/article/those-toxic-non-attendees/>.

This thesis will examine the influence American consumerism has had on the interaction of the church and its churchgoers within the religious sphere of Evangelicalism. The history of Evangelicalism in America will be examined, along with the history of consumerism and its influence on the modern American lifestyle. Then, specific examples of the effects of consumerism on churches and beliefs that fall inside the sphere of evangelicalism will be presented and discussed. Finally, the implications of this trend will be presented for the future of the modern American churchgoers' relationship with their church.

The History of Evangelicalism in America

By the High Middle Age (AD 1000 - 1250), Christianity had been institutionalized for centuries. In Medieval Europe it was impossible to plant a church or begin a new congregation. The institution of the church was a local governing establishment that could not be broken off from. A commitment to Christianity meant a commitment to the official church, regardless of customs, convictions, or attitudes.⁶ The Medieval period of Christianity's development demonstrates how participation in the church was a necessarily corporate activity, an activity that would be disastrous to be strayed from.

The sixteenth-century church splits that followed centuries after the Medieval period seemed to disrupt the idea of one singular unified church. Martin Luther's nailing of his 95 *Theses* to the door of the Roman Catholic Chapel of Wittenburg in 1517⁷ is probably the most well-known example of the wave of Reformation that swept through the European church during this period. It was not that Luther intentionally sought to create divisions and separations from

⁶ Timothy P. Jones, *Christian History Made Easy* (Torrance, California: Rose Publishing, 2009), 80.

⁷ Jones, 108.

the mainline church of the era, but the result of the Reformation was a splintering of the church into denominations.⁸

Indeed, different groups had gathered around different Christian beliefs or interpretations of the Bible before this era, but the Reformation laid the groundwork for the modern conception of interacting with one's church: find or establish the church group that best matches one's convictions.⁹ As the resulting Protestant branch of the European church demonstrated at the time of the Reformation, for the first time, protesting was an option when considering the merits of a given church. In prevailing circles, it was deemed agreeable or even moral to demand change from the institution of the church or replace it entirely.¹⁰

Seeking such church freedom was what brought denominations and Christian branches to the Americas. The Pilgrims, the Puritans, the Separatists, and other such religious groups founded some of the earliest colonies and communities in North America around the idea of practicing their distinct expression of Christianity.¹¹ These groups were not radically different in their Christian beliefs, but the foundation of Christianity in America was undeniably built upon the pretense of individualized religious preference. Once again, this view was not inherently corrupt or immoral, but the earliest chapter in the history of Christianity in America revolved around branching off, breaking away, and starting anew.

⁸ Jones, 119.

⁹ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 127.

A prominent example of this cleaving and leaving in the church occurred years later with the Stone-Campbell Restorationist Movement of the 1800s. The movement sought to eliminate denominational differences for one united Christian front.¹² Ironically, more sects developed out of the movement.¹³ As a result, it eventually melted away, but the DNA of the church in the United States revealed a common attribute from this development: a continuously decreasing emphasis on time-honored denominations and traditions.

Not long after, the Second and Third Great Awakenings in the United States and Europe lent themselves to an evolved view of how prominently a role the church could play in social reform.¹⁴ This view was not inherently controversial and was held by such revered individuals of the faith as Charles Spurgeon.¹⁵ Still, the result over time was a reduction of the message of the Bible to no more than a template for fueling social reform. Conservative Christian leaders such as D. L. Moody responded in opposition to developing the Social Gospel.¹⁶ Despite this opposition, the influence of this philosophy remains in the modern day: the church can (or, as some believe, should) be a source of reform beyond the spiritual realm of individuals' hearts.

The twentieth century was wrought with economic hardship, some of the worst human rights violations in history, and some of its most destructive armed conflicts. The culmination of both World Wars, the Great Depression, and incredible advancements in scientific discovery and

¹² Jones, 153.

¹³ Ibid., 154.

¹⁴ Ibid., 160.

¹⁵ Ibid., 158.

¹⁶ Ibid., 162.

technology certainly affected the church and its trajectory in the United States, but this is not a clear result of cause and effect. It became much harder to justify optimism in human achievement following such global conflicts. At the same time, notable Christian figures such as Billy Graham and Carl F. H. Henry proved meaningful in transforming the national attitude towards Christianity through the wave of evangelicalism.¹⁷ Evangelicals positioned themselves between fundamentalists and liberals within Christianity to ignite a revitalization in personal faith and a re-emphasis of the local church.

Trends in Church Involvement Among Evangelicals

This positioning may have seemed attractive in a period of humanity marked by some of the most treacherous milestones in the history of modern civilization. The result of such positioning led to a need for universal identity tethering. In the twenty-first century, it may seem more straightforward to identify what evangelicalism is *not* rather than what it is. A popular example of the difficulties in defining evangelicalism may be found in 2008's "An Evangelical Manifesto," published by Os Guinness and Timothy George. The collection of theological statements and beliefs was based on the bedrock of being "for Someone and for something rather than against anyone or anything."¹⁸ This affirmation is almost as inoffensive as to become meaningless: certainly, evangelicals believe in the Gospel of Jesus, but beyond this distinction, it seems the modern perception may be confused by what the Christian faith is or is not, what it can or cannot be. Then by extension, what the church can or cannot do (or even better, what the

¹⁷ Jones, 178.

¹⁸ Os Guinness and Timothy George, "The Evangelical Manifesto," Os Guinness (Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, May 7, 2008), <https://www.osguinness.com/publicstatement/the-evangelical-manifesto/>, 8.

church *should* or *should not* do) becomes muddled. A more recent and precise definition of

Evangelicalism comes from the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE):

[The] four primary characteristics of evangelicalism [are] **CONVERSIONISM**: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus; **BIBLICISM**: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority; **ACTIVISM**: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts; **CRUCICENTRISM**: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity.¹⁹

Furthermore, to be part of the Evangelical Church is to relate to a misnomer, because

Evangelicalism includes a wide range of denominationally distinct in an equally wide range of local contexts:

The National Association of Evangelicals includes a wide range of churches — from Reformed, Anabaptist, Wesleyan and Charismatic traditions — and everything in between, including nondenominational congregations. Local churches anchor our community as visible representations of the Body of Christ in action.²⁰

A recent Pew Research poll revealed that of 8,593 Evangelical Protestants surveyed, 88 percent said they attended church at least once or twice a month.²¹ In the same survey of 6,083 Mainline Protestants, 76 percent said they attended church at least once or twice a month. These results contrast with the figures reported on church membership by a Gallup Poll, which states that church membership (i.e., belonging to a church, synagogue, or mosque) is down to 47

¹⁹ “What is an Evangelical?,” The National Association of Evangelicals, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

²⁰ “Church Membership,” The National Association of Evangelicals, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.nae.org/churches/>.

²¹ “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, June 13, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/>.

percent among U.S. adults, a decrease of over 20 percent from the year 2000.²² What is leading to this discrepancy?

Another 2014 Pew Research survey found that 78 percent of nondenominational evangelicals belonged to the Evangelical Protestant tradition.²³ The identification with the nondenominational title represents a commitment to the heart of the evangelical emergence (a place between poles and staunch affiliations). Still, this intentional adoption of a lack of belonging may contribute to the fall in church membership. What is the significance of church membership? If most Protestants report church attendance, why does it matter what church membership statistics reflect?

The camouflage issue lies in what church membership means literally and symbolically. Most evangelicals understand church membership in the literal sense: committing to attend and interact with a church to denote exclusivity through volunteering, financial giving, or even group-decision making.²⁴ It is not uncommon for churches, especially Baptist churches, to have specific requirements to attain membership within a church and then to have church members recorded and accounted for annually.²⁵

²² Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls below Majority for First Time," Gallup.com (Gallup, November 20, 2021), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

²³ "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, June 13, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/>.

²⁴ Thomas Kidd, "Why American Church Membership Is Plummeting," The Gospel Coalition (The Gospel Coalition, INC., April 1, 2021), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/why-americas-church-membership-rate-is-cratering/>.

²⁵ Wm M Pinson, "Baptists Believe in a Regenerate Church Membership: Beliefs, Polity, Ministries, Practices, Organizations, and Heritage of Baptists," Beliefs, polity, ministries, practices, organizations, and heritage of Baptists | Authoritative information on the beliefs, polity, ministries, practices, organizations, and heritage of Baptists. Designed to be useful for Baptists and non-Baptists alike., October 26, 2021, <https://www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/regenerate-church-membership/>.

However, church membership symbolizes commitment relationally. Literally and officially, church membership may not require that a person belongs solely to one church in his volunteering, giving, or worship service attendance. However, the implication of church membership is certainly a special reservation for the church the Christian is seeking membership in. This symbolic understanding of church membership explains the current decline of church membership, while the rate of church attendance holds steady. Commitment to a church has become de-emphasized while attending church, in general, is still venerated. Numerous factors have contributed to this shift of values, primarily the understanding of consumerism in modern society.²⁶

Consumerism: A Definition

Consumerism describes a prevailing attitude born out of a capitalistic economic structure that emphasizes the relationship between the producer and the consumer of what is produced.²⁷ Historically, being a negative term (the Latin word it derives from means ‘to devour’ or ‘to waste’), consumerism does not simply refer to a standard customer interaction but instead to a pervasive desire to acquire goods as an adverse effect of modern capitalism.²⁸ Consumerism represents a harmful and ultimately destructive relationship people have with purchasing and experiencing products. A consumer relies on their ability to freely peruse and select as often as they would like, from as many choices as possible, without any consequences to hinder them

²⁶ Eve Poole, *Buying God: Consumerism and Theology* (La Vergne: Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2018), 78.

²⁷ Poole, 65.

²⁸ Ibid.

from their consumption. The relief of consumerism is not truly in the products being consumed but, in the ability, to consume goods.

Consumerism is not unique to the United States, but to deny its overt presence in America is impossible. Every aspect of modern living relies at least partially on consumerist attitudes. Fashion changes with each season. The rise and fall of popularity in specific dresses and styles demands upgrading one's closet regularly. All digital media relies on periodic and almost compulsory consumption. TV shows, streaming services, podcasts, movies, and even books require continuous, methodical consumption by people to be profitable. Any leisure activity, no matter how quaint or straightforward, is fed first and foremost by the market of tools required to carry out the activity. Any sport requires the player to compare equipment brands against one another and select his preferred variation, which will be upgraded for as long as he plays the sport. Lawncare requires people to go to a store, compare products, select their choices, and then continuously use that product over and over until a new brand is preferred. Modern hobbies, which may seem innocent, are giant feeders of consumerism. Does a person want to assemble models? Do they want to cook? Travel? Have pets? Even raising children represents a series of consumptions: diapers, baby food, toys, clothes, instruments, equipment, etc.

While consumerism has negative connotations, it is not automatically evil to participate in consumerism, especially when it is all but inescapable to the person simply functioning in American society. Nor is it incredibly modern; there have always been choices people could make when comparing and purchasing goods and services. However, the prevalence and ease of accessibility of consumerism are at their strongest in modern America. What has led to this abundance of consumerism? And what is its connection to church membership?

Causes of Modern Consumerist Accessibility

Before the 1950s, the United States was not, by and large, a consumerist culture. The Industrial Revolution brought technological advancements that made certain goods easier to attain and enabled mass production.²⁹ Regardless, the average American income did not lend itself towards recreational purchasing, especially following the Great Depression.³⁰ However, following the Second World War, the return of men from the war front to the home front suddenly introduced thousands upon thousands of new workers to the United States economy.³¹ Families now had spending power that allowed for the purchasing of non-necessary goods as a regular activity.

Some of these previously non-essential items included refrigerators, televisions, and automobiles. The increasingly common presence of televisions in the American home lent itself to a natural feedback loop of consumerism. TV advertisements could be ported directly into every living room in America, and their repetition and dreamy imagery began to synonymize the American dream with consumerism.

The increased commonality of the automobile is also a critical factor in the modern American consumerist society. Both local and interstate roadways existed before the 1950s, but through the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, the federal government would construct over 42,500 miles of highways throughout the country to support national automobile and truck

²⁹ Levy, 260.

³⁰ Ibid., 377.

³¹ Ibid., 486.

travel.³² While the most obvious effect of the competition of the highway system in 1990³³ was an immensely increased ease of access to all parts of the country, a less pronounced effect was the increased convenience of transporting products throughout the country. Almost any consumer goods can now be quickly shipped from one side of the country to another in a matter of days or even hours. In addition, if one area is out of a particular product, a person is free to travel to a different community (or, in some cases, even to a different state) to seek to purchase the product elsewhere. This ease of access to consumer goods would have been unimaginable less than a century ago.

A final factor to consider in integrating consumerism irrevocably into American society is the development of the World Wide Web, also known as the Internet. The Internet is such a common resource today that its presence and effect on consumerism are almost certainly taken for granted. Computers were being refined and outfitted for everyday working people as early as the 1950s,³⁴ but it was not until 1975 that the first personal computers were introduced to the market.³⁵ By the 1990s, names like Apple and Microsoft became ubiquitous in the national culture,³⁶ and the profitability of the Internet was undeniable. Online storefronts such as eBay may seem now like an echo of the past relative to online merchandise juggernauts like Amazon. In the earliest stages of the Internet, eBay represented most simply what the Internet symbolized for the American infatuation with personalized consumerism.

³² *Assessing and Managing the Ecological Impacts of Paved Roads* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2005), 40.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Johnny Ryan, *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

No matter where a person lived or what access they had to transportation, if they had access to the Internet and enough funds, there was almost limitless potential for what they could purchase. As the Internet expanded, so did its global connectivity. Now, international trade can be completed in a few keystrokes over the course of seconds. The Internet, while not strictly a source of commerce, represents perhaps the purest form of consumerism in modern society. Every website is competing for the consumer's experience. Every page, profile, and piece of media is produced to attract and hold a viewer's attention. However, no matter what website, service, or internet persona is consumed, there is always another to replace it in every genre, style, and type. Consumerism reaches its zenith in the endless pages of the Internet, as there is a constantly expanding library of content and material freely available to anyone at any time.

The Connection of Consumerism to the Church

What is the connection of these factors in the rise of consumerism to the church? A 2017 study placed the number of churches in America at around 384,000.³⁷ Numbers reported during the COVID-19 pandemic still placed the number around 380,000.³⁸ This number represents an overall increase in churches of about 50,000 since 1998.³⁹ One of the main reasons for this increase is a glut of nondenominational churches being planted in the last three decades.

With such an abundance of churches, especially those untethered to a denominational background, the role that consumerism plays in the average American Christian's church

³⁷ S. G. Bauer, "How Many Congregations Are There? Updating a Survey-Based Estimate," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 56: 438-448 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12330>

³⁸ Charita Goshay, "'Difficult Days Are Ahead' for America's Churches, Faith Institutions," *Akron Beacon Journal* (Akron Beacon Journal, August 22, 2020), <https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/local/2020/08/22/difficult-days-are-ahead-for-americas-churches-faith-institutions/42282593/>.

³⁹ Bauer, 442.

experience becomes evident. There was a time, perhaps only 100 years ago when a Christian and his family were limited to only their local church as their house of worship. Automobiles and highways were nonexistent, so there was no expectation of travel to interact with a church. Once the family car and complex road systems became the norm, it may have been less unusual to peruse the market of churches. A person could travel from one congregation to another. Still, it was not as though a person could access a comprehensive list of local congregations to compare one against the other.

The advent and accessibility of the Internet changed this. Now, with just the simplest Internet search hundreds of options for houses of worship can be displayed before a person's eyes. Local proximity is rarely a limiting factor anymore, as a family can travel ten, twenty, or however many miles need be to reach their congregation of choice. This congregation would not have been discovered otherwise except by utilizing the Internet.

The methodology of the Internet, being based on competition and user accessibility, generates a conception of the institution of the church akin to a product. The search engine Google, which was developed in the late 1990s,⁴⁰ currently holds over 90 percent of the market share in Internet search engines.⁴¹ Most people who use the Internet will use Google (whether they realize it or not). A popular feature of Google is its Google Reviews, which allows users with Google accounts to leave reviews of any business, institute, or geographic location

⁴⁰ Ryan, 118.

⁴¹ Alex Chris, "Top 10 Search Engines in the World (2023 Update)," [reliablesoft.net](https://www.reliablesoft.net/top-10-search-engines-in-the-world/), January 2, 2023, <https://www.reliablesoft.net/top-10-search-engines-in-the-world/>.

possessing a Google Business profile.⁴² Churches are not immune to the Google Review feature. Every church with an online presence will have reviews. Reviews fundamentally compare one service or product to another. The ability to leave a review is based on the user's subjective, personalized experience. In this way, churches are reduced to products. The experience a church provides a consumer lends itself to a ranking that can be easily compared to any other church. A lack of reviews might even be considered a detriment to a church, as such a phenomenon projects a lack of popularity.

It may seem like a voluntary choice to participate in the virtual world of the Internet as a church. This is far from the truth, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In the wake of the pandemic, a Barna Group survey revealed that 96 percent of pastors had streamed their service online at least once.⁴³ Furthermore, 53 percent of practicing Christians chose to stream their church service online.⁴⁴ During the height of the pandemic, when public gatherings were discouraged or even outlawed, it became necessary to meet online for churches or go weeks without large-scale ministering to their congregation. The predicament of the pandemic led to an unprecedented amount of pastoral online streaming, a trend that continued years past the onset of the pandemic. A Christian Standard survey of over 400 churches revealed that each week, the

⁴² "Get Google Reviews," Google Business Profile Help (Google), accessed March 4, 2023, <https://support.google.com/business/answer/3474122?hl=en>.

⁴³ Nick Galov, "22 Online Church Statistics for 2022, the Digital Sunday Mass," WebTribunal, November 22, 2022, <https://webtribunal.net/blog/online-church-statistics/#gref>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

average attendance of online-streamed services was almost 200,000, an average of over 600 viewers per church.⁴⁵

With churches integrating into the Internet as a necessity, the view of the church as a product instead of a community-centered experience is impossible to ignore. There are more churches in the country than at any other time in history. There is greater, easier physical access to these churches than ever before. Almost any church desiring outreach in lieu of the pandemic must include itself in the endless catalog of the Internet, where every church rivals another simply by virtue of its reviews, page visits, and search engine results. When the institution of the church is forced to become commodified in the same persuasions and distinctions as every other product offered to the American people, it is unfathomable that American Christians would no longer ask, “How may I contribute to my local church body?” but rather “How may I discover the church that caters to my preferences?” Furthermore, the inevitable response to the consumer mindset is to enable consumption as readily as possible or face irrelevancy. This creates a feedback loop of increasing reliance on consumerism that causes potential congregants to consider the merits of a church based on their preferences, leading church leaders to seek innovations that will capture the attention of potential congregants, which not only reinforces the consumerism attitude but then creates competition among churches. The inevitable progression of this product-customer relationship between churches and potential congregants is a church shaped primarily by the whims and preferences of its target audience.

⁴⁵ Kent E. Fillinger, “Behind the Screen: Insights Into Online Church,” Christian Standard, July 22, 2022, <https://christianstandard.com/2022/07/behind-the-screen-insights-into-online-church/#:~:text=Of%20the%20412%20churches%20that,619%20online%20viewers%20per%20church.>

Examples of the Intersection of Consumerism and the American Church

When a target demographic is in view rather than a lost person, church leaders may fall back on business philosophies to win their audience. The book *Sticky Church* by San Diego church planter Larry Osborne is an instructional book for Christian church leaders interested in maintaining regular church attendance. In the first chapter, Osborne explains what a ‘sticky church’ is: “stickier churches are healthier churches. They not only draw in spiritual window-shoppers and lead them to Christ; they also grow them up to maturity.”⁴⁶ Osborne’s statement is not inherently incorrect, but the language he uses to describe the institution of the Christian church, and the people that come through its doors, reveals a consumerist influence that contributes to the perception of the church as a product. The reference to potential congregants as “spiritual window-shoppers,” as a metaphor, evokes imagery of customer and product, competition and attraction.

In the third chapter of *Sticky Church*, Osborne explains a critical decision he made in his church plant to move away from advertising: “[A] church that develops a ministry worthy of word-of-mouth referrals before launching its marketing campaigns or outreach programs will find that those who come once the marketing begins won’t just pop in for a quick look – they’ll stick around for the long haul.”⁴⁷ The heart of Osborne’s message, once again, is not the source of the consumerist critique. Any church leader would want their church to be worthy of verbal recommendation. The concern emanates from Osborne's emphasis on marketing strategies as the key performance indicators.

⁴⁶ Larry W. Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2008), 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 – 22.

“Word-of-mouth” is a standard marketing term that manipulates a customer’s expectations. From the college textbook *Principles of Marketing*: “[Set] customer’s expectations a bit low, and then exceed those expectations in order to create delighted customers who are enthusiastic about your product. A seller hopes that enthusiastic customers will tell their friends about the seller’s offering.”⁴⁸ This example demonstrates the risk church leaders run by engaging their churches in marketing terms. The terms are not the critical issue but rather the production of skewed views of the church as a business and its congregants as its customers.

In John Patrick Leary’s book *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism*, an examination of specific words and phrases used in the contemporary world are analyzed as doublespeak for encouraging workers and enlarging profits:

From Silicon Valley to the White House, from kindergarten to college, and from the factory floor to the church pulpit, we are called to be entrepreneurs and **leaders**, to be **curators** of an ever-expanding roster of **competencies** [...] These keywords share an affinity for hierarchy and competition, an often-uncritical acceptance of the benevolence of computing technologies, and a celebration of moral values thought to be indistinguishable from economic ones: decisive leadership, artistic **passion**, and self-realization.⁴⁹

Words carry unavoidable connotations, and their cultural marks support adjacent themes and ideas. When church leaders embrace a vocabulary of capitalism, a vocabulary shared with businessmen, entrepreneurs, and investors, they run the risk of empowering an understanding of the church as a business endeavor, or at least as an institution that relies on business practices for success.

⁴⁸ University of Minnesota, Chapter 14.3.

⁴⁹ John Patrick Leary, *Keywords: the New Language of Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2018), 11.

According to Outreach 100, a partnership project between *Outreach* magazine, Lifeway Research, and Hartford Institute for Religion Research, the largest church in America as of 2022 is Life.Church, an evangelical congregation pastored by Craig Groeschel.⁵⁰ The church was founded in 1996 and currently has an attendance of 85,000 congregants.⁵¹ Groeschel is best known for his leadership development materials, which have a Christian emphasis.⁵² *The Craig Groeschel Leadership Podcast*, launched in 2016, has amassed almost 4.5 million views on YouTube alone.⁵³ One of Groeschel's earlier books, *Chazown*, has the front cover description of "Discover and Pursue God's Purpose for Your Life."⁵⁴ The book's back cover description reads: "Tired of living half a life—or even a waking nightmare? Struggling to find meaning in a job you don't like? Facing graduation or midlife changes in a faltering economy? Wishing you could rekindle a dream you gave up long ago? In this practical, energizing guide, pastor and author Craig Groeschel shows how to live life fully by finding, naming, and achieving your unique, God-given goal."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ "Outreach 100: Largest Churches in America," Outreach 100: Largest Churches in America (Outreach Magazine), accessed February 6, 2023, <https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america>.

⁵¹ "Life.Church," Outreach 100 (Outreach Magazine), accessed March 4, 2023, <https://outreach100.com/churches/lifechurch-2>.

⁵² "About," Craig Groeschel (Life.Church), accessed March 4, 2023, <https://www.craiggroeschel.com/about>.

⁵³ "Craig Groeschel," YouTube (YouTube), accessed March 4, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@craiggroeschel/about>.

⁵⁴ Craig Groeschel, *Chazown: a Different Way to See Your Life* (Sisters, Or: Multnomah Publishers, 2006).

⁵⁵ Groeschel.

Outreach 100 lists Lakewood Church as the third largest church in the United States.⁵⁶ Lakewood Church is pastored by Joel Osteen.⁵⁷ Osteen's breakout book, *Your Best Life Now*, has a back cover description that reads: "Do you often dream of living a more rewarding life? Do you aspire to a better job, a stronger marriage, a happier home? Perhaps you simply want to accomplish more and leave a lasting legacy for future generations? How do you break out and experience the full potential that God intended you to have? The answer lies in a simple yet profound process to change the way you think about your life and help you accomplish what's truly important."⁵⁸

It may be no surprise to learn that Joel Osteen is a commonly lambasted figure in the realm of evangelical leaders. Most infamously, Westminster Seminary California professor Michael Horton appeared on the journalism television program *60 Minutes* to call Osteen's brand of Christianity heretical.⁵⁹ The organization 9Marks, which publishes materials to educate pastors on biblical church practices, published a review of *Your Best Life Now*. The review characterized Osteen's theology as only performatively Christian: "It should be noted clearly and widely that there is nothing Christian about this book. Yes, Osteen talks about God throughout, but it is not the God of the Bible he has in mind. Osteen's God is little more than the mechanism

⁵⁶ "Outreach 100: Largest Churches in America," Outreach 100, accessed February 6, 2023. <https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america>.

⁵⁷ "Lakewood Church," Outreach 100 (Outreach Magazine), accessed March 4, 2023, <https://outreach100.com/churches/lakewood-church-2>.

⁵⁸ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (New York, NY: TIME WARNER Book Group, 2004).

⁵⁹ "Joel Osteen Answers his Critics". CBS News 60 Minutes. October 14, 2007.

that gives the power to positive thinking. There is no cross. There is no sin. There is no redemption or salvation or eternity.”⁶⁰

Osteen’s self-help theology reinforces the consumerist view of the burgeoning Christian. Spirituality, morality, and even religion are only beneficial as far as they are profitable. The purpose of intimacy with God is for its material benefits, for its consumable merits. The comparison drawn between Osteen and Groeschel is not one of theology or doctrine but one of appearances: in a world of endless options, where churches can be ranked side by side on attendance, social media influence, and performance, how can a Christian who has been trained to act as a consumer of the church instead of its patron be blamed for confusing the two resources?

Furthermore, in *Chazown*, the topics of interest Groeschel highlights undermine the relevancy of participation in the community of the church. The crux of Groeschel’s book is that a person’s *chazown*, the goal ordained by God for one’s life, is based on the correction of five areas (called “spokes”) which include one’s relationship with God, one’s relationship with people, finances, personal health, and work.⁶¹ While Groeschel gives fair service to Scriptural references throughout, it is critical to note that in the section of the book titled “Second Spoke: Relationships with People,” Groeschel does not so much as even mention the word “church” on more than two occasions.⁶² He makes a vague mention of “a faith community”⁶³ and getting

⁶⁰ Greg Gilbert, “Book Review: Your Best Life Now, by Joel Osteen,” 9Marks, March 8, 2001, <https://www.9marks.org/review/your-best-life-now-joel-osteen/>.

⁶¹ Groeschel, 101.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 126; 136, 137.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 128.

“into a small group,”⁶⁴ but otherwise, Groeschel does not overtly encourage participation in church. Instead, relationships are tools for getting one closer to his *chazown*, and for all intents and purposes the church may as well be an ethereal concept floating hazily above Groeschel’s words but never genuinely being engaged within his text.

This lack of emphasis on engagement with the church is acceptable in a cultural landscape that values the church as a service or product. When church participation is reduced to one of several means by which a person achieves their worldly aspirations, it should be no surprise when the institution of the church is viewed as some sort of business enterprise. Businesses succeed and expand because of a consistent and expanding customer base. When the success of the church is linked to its attendance, in the expansion of its customers, church leaders risk painting an image of the institution of the church as one relying on marketing strategies that feed consumerist attitudes.

Thom S. Rainer is a Christian author famous for his books on church growth. In the 1950s, the church growth movement pushed missiological thinking to focus on the factors that led some congregations to increase in size exponentially. In contrast, other congregations struggled for years to add members. The movement was founded primarily by the Indian missionary Donald McGavran, who wrote extensively on his theories of cross-cultural assimilation into the church as directly feeding church growth. Rainer’s 2011 book *Simple Church* builds upon the foundation set by McGavran to explain how decreasing the number of programs in a church’s repertoire will improve long-term attendance.⁶⁵ What makes *Simple*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁶⁵ Thom S. Rainer, and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples*. (Nashville: B & H Pub. Group, 2011), 25, 26.

Church distinct is its reliance on a survey conducted by Rainer and his co-author, Eric Geiger, of over 200 churches in the United States for most of its claims. The survey of these churches, most of which were Southern Baptist, involved polling the senior pastor or head of discipleship of each church on how well the church excelled in “simple church elements,” which include “clarity, movement, alignment, and focus.”⁶⁶ The same staff person of each church was also polled on worship service attendance averages for several years. Churches that had grown at least 5 percent in worship service attendance for at least three years straight were considered to be growing. The survey revealed that there was a “highly significant relationship between a simple church design and the vitality [growth] of a local church.”⁶⁷ The results of this survey led the authors to conclude that “Measuring the church’s annual average weekly worship attendance measures the ability of the church to attach people, not just attract them. Many churches may be able to lead people to Christ but then fail to assimilate them into the life of the church.”⁶⁸

This reasoning is faulty. According to Outreach 100 list of Fastest-Growing Churches in America, the top ten fastest-growing churches have attendance increases from 2021 to 2022 ranging from 73 percent to 300 percent.⁶⁹ Only five of these ten churches offer membership classes, according to each church’s website. The fifth church on the list, Flatirons Community Church, even has this statement on their Frequently Asked Questions webpage: “We don’t have

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶⁹ “Fastest-Growing Churches in America,” Outreach 100 (Outreach Magazine), accessed February 6, 2023, <https://outreach100.com/fastest-growing-churches-in-america>.

any [church membership]. We're not really into adding names to lists, so if you'd like to be a member, congratulations! You're in!"⁷⁰

What this discrepancy reveals in the conclusions drawn in *Simple Church* with the reality of the relationship between the fastest-growing American churches and church membership is a misunderstanding of what makes an effective and popular church. Indeed, a church with an extraordinary weekly worship service will likely draw a consistent crowd in the same way a famous musician can expect to sell out arenas on a world tour. The spectacle of a popular worship service may feed a person's soul just as much as their appetite for novelty and experience. The lack of church membership in the fastest-growing churches reveals a different factor than a commitment to the institution at play. Church membership does not guarantee that any given church member's idea of the church is wholly divorced from consumerism. However, a church willing to forgo the concept of membership (or even to scoff at it) is a church willing to forgo the accountability, commitment, and consistency implied by the membership. This attitude towards church membership reinforces a consumerist relationship with churchgoers and their church. The implementation of church membership communicates to attendees that their ongoing participation in the ministry of the church is encouraged, and appreciated but also necessary for the whole experience of church attendance that is envisioned by Christ in his earthly ministry and the words of the New Testament authors.

What Does the Bible Say About Christians' Relationship with the Church?

⁷⁰ "I'm New," Flatirons Community Church, <https://www.flatironschurch.com/new/>.

A discussion of a faulty and dangerous perception of the church, that of a product to be consumed until a better variation is purchasable, would not be complete without references to the Biblical framework that forms the divinely-intended perception of the church. God's desire for His children, those who have repented of their sins and have put their faith in the salvation offered by Jesus' death and resurrection, comes alive in the development of the Church and its organization throughout the New Testament.

The clearest place this is demonstrated in the New Testament is in Acts 2. Following the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost,⁷¹ Peter addresses the crowd of unsaved witnesses.⁷² Peter implores the crowd to repent and be baptized in the name of Christ,⁷³ and 3,000 new believers are added to their number as a result.⁷⁴ This passage demonstrates new Christians being added to the existing body of believers in a way evoking church membership. Acts 2:42-47 tells how the believers, old and new, did not dissipate to pursue individual walks of faith but rather continued to break bread together, worship together, and grow in their spiritual understanding together. The participation of the believers in their individual faiths was directly related to their corporate activity as a body of believers, and the baptizing of the new Christians on the day of Pentecost signaled initiation into that body.

⁷¹ Acts 2:4.

⁷² Acts 2:14.

⁷³ Acts 2:38.

⁷⁴ Acts 2:41.

Christians are constantly referred to as members of the body of Christ.⁷⁵ The imagery used by Paul most likely envisions the entire collection of living Christians, yet the implication of his words requires direct cooperation between subgroups that make up the overall Christian body. Given that Paul's letters were crafted for specific congregations dealing with specific issues, it becomes evident that Paul's description of members working together in the body refers to congregants of a local church. This collaboration Paul speaks of is impossible without sustained involvement in a church, especially in such a way as to require deeper interaction than just weekly worship service attendance.

The necessity of sustained church involvement regarding church administration is also made evident throughout the New Testament. First, the requirements of leaders of congregations are compared to the shepherding of a flock.⁷⁶ It is impossible for a pastor to watch over a congregation in the same way that a shepherd watches over sheep if the congregation is composed of people who pass through the church as vagabonds or those who attend the worship service but see no need to engage with the church at a deeper level. How can a pastor recognize growth, unhealthy practices, or any spiritual need among a congregation that does not value intensive and regular participation in a specific congregation? Second, the requirement of people in a church to submit to their church leaders⁷⁷ is meaningless in a church that does not emphasize the need for commitment to church involvement. No obedience or submission is required for a person who has only a transient relationship with any given church they attend. The pastor

⁷⁵ Rom. 12:4-5, 1 Cor. 12:27.

⁷⁶ Acts 20:28, 1 Pt. 5:2.

⁷⁷ Heb. 13:17.

becomes a spokesman for a product to a person who sees no need for a formal commitment to the church beyond regular attendance rather than a spiritual leader commanding respect.

Finally, Christians cannot carry out meaningful relationships that satisfy the conditions set forth by the Bible without regular, continuous involvement in a local church. A Christian is supposed to bear the burdens of other Christians,⁷⁸ teach and admonish other Christians,⁷⁹ and encourage each other.⁸⁰ A Christian cannot accomplish these requirements without regular involvement in a local church, an involvement that requires close relationships and consistent service. Without the obligation to participate in church with a desire for longevity, vulnerability, and mutual discipleship, it is not feasible to satisfy the biblical expectations of church membership. A church attendee who views the church as consumable will not be inclined to endure or commit themselves to an ongoing relationship with the congregation of the church and thus will not experience the teaching, admonition, and encouragement integral to a local church body.

Implications of Consumerism in the Church

Fewer and fewer people identify as Christians in America.⁸¹ It should not be surprising that a consumerist view of the church would diminish its value as an institution in the United States, thus characterizing its primary benefactors, Christians, as a less and less popular group. If

⁷⁸ Gal. 6:2.

⁷⁹ Col. 3:16.

⁸⁰ 1 Thes. 5:11.

⁸¹ Travis Mitchell, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, June 9, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

this attitude towards the church continues to grow, then the perception of the church will take on characteristics of profit-driven enterprises. As churches adopt more active online presences, a person's entire church involvement could be reduced to Internet engagement. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, it was unheard of to encourage church members to stream a live broadcast of the church as a substitute for in-person attendance. There may come a time when churches produce subscription services akin to Netflix or YouTube Premium that enable access to online church materials.

As churches compete against one another, embracing novelty in light of the gospel will become necessary. Right now, any person can search "Best Churches in My Area" on Google, and the top result will be a Yelp list of the 'Top 10 Best Churches' near the person's locality. With unprecedented competition, churches may begin to rely on extravagant worship services, popular guest speakers, audacious outreaches, or even sideshow acts. A more mainstream example may be a "Shark Week" themed sermon series presented at Dallas's Fellowship Church, which aimed to "[spin] popular television into spiritual self-help lessons so that congregants might navigate metaphorical 'sharks' in their lives."⁸² More outlandish examples may be the Cussing Pastor, a popular media personality in Memphis known for his expletive-laced sermons,⁸³ or a Land O' Lakes-based church created for nudists.⁸⁴ The market of churches is

⁸² Hunt, 23.

⁸³ Leonard Blair, "Cussing Pastor' Defends Twerking Contest Held at Church, Tells Critics 'f*** You'," *The Christian Post*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/cussing-pastor-defends-twerking-contest-held-at-church-tells-critics-f-you.html>.

⁸⁴ Pam, "Garden of Eden Church," *About Garden Of Eden Church (Garden of Eden Church)*, accessed March 5, 2023, <https://www.gardenofedenchurch.org/about.html>.

more niche than ever, with such possibilities as cowboy church,⁸⁵ NASCAR church,⁸⁶ hip-hop church,⁸⁷ heavy metal church,⁸⁸ and video game church⁸⁹ for a person to choose from. While such examples may seem absurd now, in the future such marketing of the church may be profitable in attracting customers to the church.

Without the accountability of church membership, people can go to any church they please. Their desire to participate within a church will be measured by how enamored they are with their experience. A bevy of symptoms arise from this disease:

Christians can think it's fine to attend a church indefinitely without joining; Christians think of getting baptized apart from joining; Christians take the Lord's Supper without joining; Christians view the Lord's Supper as their own private, mystical experience for Christians and not as an activity for church members who are incorporated into body life together; Christians don't integrate their Monday-to-Saturday lives with the lives of other saints; Christians assume they can make a perpetual habit of being absent from the church's gathering a few Sundays a month or more; Christians make major life decisions (moving, accepting a promotion, choosing a spouse, etc.) without considering the effects of those decisions on the family of relationships in the church or without consulting the wisdom of the church's pastors and other members; Christians buy homes or rent apartments with scant regard for how factors such as distance and cost will affect their abilities to serve their church; Christians don't realize that they are partly responsible for both the spiritual welfare and the physical livelihood of the other members of their church, even members they have not met. When one mourns, one mourns by himself. When one rejoices, one rejoices by himself.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ "What is AFCC?," The American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://americanfcc.org/about/>.

⁸⁶ "Our Ministries," Auto Racing Outreach, accessed April 1, 2023, http://autoracingoutreach.com/?page_id=7.

⁸⁷ "About Us," Hip Hop Church Global, accessed April 1, 2023, http://autoracingoutreach.com/?page_id=7.

⁸⁸ "Heavy Metal Church," Heavy Metal Church, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.heavymetalchurch.com/>.

⁸⁹ "GodSquad Church," GodSquad Church, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.godsquadchurch.com/>.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 14.

Church leaders feed this perception of the church by speaking of the church in cultural terms related to business, marketing, and enterprise. Such language reinforces the view of congregants as customers. Congregations are reduced to focus groups, groups led by facilitators disguised as church leaders.

Conclusion

Consumerism in American society affects the view church leaders and churchgoers have of their relationship to the church within Evangelicalism. When consumerist attitudes are embraced within Evangelicalism, church is reduced to a product for consumption. The consumerist way of life evident in American society needs to be purged from the church so that churchgoers can embrace the community desired by God for His people: a community of self-denial for the sake of sharing the gospel and encouraging other believers.

Bibliography

- “14.3 Customer Satisfaction.” Principles of Marketing. University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition, 2015. This edition adapted from a work originally produced in 2010 by a publisher who has requested that it not receive attribution., October 27, 2015. <https://open.lib.umn.edu/principlesmarketing/chapter/14-3-customer-satisfaction/>.
- “About.” Craig Groeschel. Life.Church. Accessed March 4, 2023. <https://www.craiggroeschel.com/about>.
- “About Us.” Hip Hop Church Global. Accessed April 1, 2023. http://autoracingoutreach.com/?page_id=7.
- Assessing and Managing the Ecological Impacts of Paved Roads*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2005.
- Blair, Leonard. “‘Cussing Pastor’ Defends Twerking Contest Held at Church, Tells Critics ‘f*** You’.” The Christian Post, February 27, 2019. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/cussing-pastor-defends-twerking-contest-held-at-church-tells-critics-f-you.html>.
- Brauer, S.G. “How Many Congregations Are There? Updating a Survey-Based Estimate.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 56: 438-448. 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12330>
- Chris, Alex. “Top 10 Search Engines in the World (2023 Update).” *reliablesoft.net*, January 2, 2023. <https://www.reliablesoft.net/top-10-search-engines-in-the-world/>.
- “Church Membership.” The National Association of Evangelicals. Accessed April 1, 2023. <https://www.nae.org/churches/>.
- “Craig Groeschel.” YouTube. YouTube. Accessed March 4, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/@craiggroeschel/about>.
- “Fastest-Growing Churches in America.” Outreach 100. Outreach Magazine. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://outreach100.com/fastest-growing-churches-in-america>.
- Fillinger, Kent E. “Behind the Screen: Insights Into Online Church.” *Christian Standard*, July 22, 2022. <https://christianstandard.com/2022/07/behind-the-screen-insights-into-online-church/#:~:text=Of%20the%20412%20churches%20that,619%20online%20viewers%20per%20church>.

Foster, John, Matthew Taylor, David Boecklin, Mathias Tanner, and J. Luyken. "Religion and the Founding of the American Republic America as a Religious Refuge: The Seventeenth Century, Part 1." Library of Congress, June 4, 1998.
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html>.

Galov, Nick. "22 Online Church Statistics for 2022, the Digital Sunday Mass." WebTribunal, November 22, 2022. <https://webtribunal.net/blog/online-church-statistics/#gref>.

"Get Google Reviews." Google Business Profile Help. Google. Accessed March 4, 2023.
<https://support.google.com/business/answer/3474122?hl=en>.

"GodSquad Church." GodSquad Church. Accessed April 1, 2023.
<https://www.godsquadchurch.com/>.

Groeschel, Craig. *Chazown: Discover and Pursue God's Purpose for Your Life*. New York: Multnomah, 2006.

Gilbert, Greg. "Book Review: Your Best Life Now, by Joel Osteen." 9Marks, March 8, 2001.
<https://www.9marks.org/review/your-best-life-now-joel-osteen/>.

Guinness, Os, and Timothy George. "The Evangelical Manifesto." Os Guinness. Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, May 7, 2008.
<https://www.osguinness.com/publicstatement/the-evangelical-manifesto/>.

"Heavy Metal Church." Heavy Metal Church. Accessed April 1, 2023.
<https://www.heavymetalchurch.com/>.

"I'm New." Flatirons Community Church. Accessed February 6, 2023.
<https://www.flatironschurch.com/new/>.

"Joel Osteen Answers his Critics". CBS News 60 Minutes. October 14, 2007. Retrieved May 13, 2011.

Jones, Jeffrey M. "U.S. Church Membership Falls below Majority for First Time." Gallup.com. Gallup, November 20, 2021. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

Jones, Timothy P. (Timothy Paul). *Christian History Made Easy*. Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2009.

Kidd, Thomas. "Why American Church Membership Is Plummeting." The Gospel Coalition. The Gospel Coalition, INC., April 1, 2021.
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/why-americas-church-membership-rate-is-cratering/>.

“Lakewood Church,” Outreach 100 (Outreach Magazine), accessed March 4, 2023, <https://outreach100.com/churches/lakewood-church-2>.

Leary, John Patrick. *Keywords: the New Language of Capitalism*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2018.

Leeman, Jonathan. *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

Levy, Jonathan. *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States*. New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group, 2021.

“Life.Church.” Outreach 100. Outreach Magazine. Accessed March 4, 2023. <https://outreach100.com/churches/lifechurch-2>.

Mitchell, Travis. “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Pew Research Center, June 9, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

Osborne, Larry W. *Sticky Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.

Osteen, Joel. *Your Best Life Now*. New York, NY: TIME WARNER Book Group, 2004.

“Outreach 100: Largest Churches in America.” Outreach 100: Largest Churches in America. Outreach Magazine. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america>.

“Our Ministries.” Auto Racing Outreach. Accessed April 1, 2023. http://autoracingoutreach.com/?page_id=7.

Owens, Conley. “Is Church Membership Biblical?” SVRBC. Silicon Valley Reformed Baptist Church, December 21, 2020. <https://svrbc.org/articles/2020-12-21/is-church-membership-biblical/>.

Pam. “Garden of Eden Church.” About Garden Of Eden Church. Garden of Eden Church. Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.gardenofedenchurch.org/about.html>.

Pinson, Wm M. “Baptists Believe in a Regenerate Church Membership: Beliefs, Polity, Ministries, Practices, Organizations, and Heritage of Baptists.” Beliefs, polity, ministries, practices, organizations, and heritage of Baptists | Authoritative information on the beliefs, polity, ministries, practices, organizations, and heritage of Baptists. Designed to be useful for Baptists and non-Baptists alike., October 26, 2021. <https://www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/regenerate-church-membership/>.

Poole, Eve. *Buying God: Consumerism and Theology*. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, n.d.

Rainer, Thom S., and Eric Geiger. *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*. [Updated edition.]. Nashville: B & H Pub. Group, 2011.

“Religious Landscape Study.” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Pew Research Center, June 13, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/>.

Ryan, Johnny. *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future*. London: Reaktion, 2010.

Schmucker, Matt. “Those Toxic Non-Attendees.” 9Marks, February 25, 2010. <https://www.9marks.org/article/those-toxic-non-attendees/>.

“The Rise of American Consumerism.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tupperware-consumer/>.

“What is AFCC?.” The American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches. Accessed April 1, 2023. <https://americanfcc.org/about/>.

“What is an Evangelical?.” The National Association of Evangelicals. Accessed April 1, 2023. <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

Wormald, Benjamin. “Chapter 1: The Changing Religious Composition of the U.S.” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Pew Research Center, November 18, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/>.