



continuous conversion

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CAFETERIA CHRISTIANTY

by Sara Tusek

When I was a child, my mother used to take me, for a special treat, to the Blue Boar Cafeteria in Louisville. I could go through the line and choose whatever I wanted for lunch.

Red and green Jello, cut up into cubes, was a must-have. Whatever else I chose, to make a balanced meal, was quite secondary. I think I liked the pretty colors and intriguing bouncy texture of the Jello—certainly not the flavor, which was basically about like Elmer's glue.

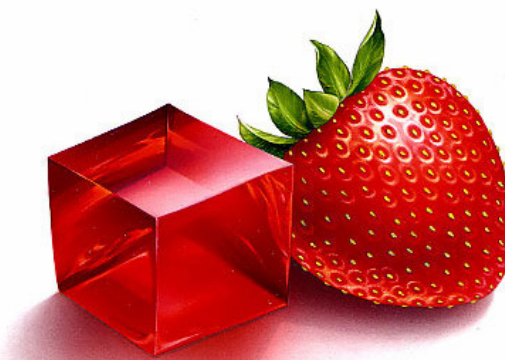
The joy of the cafeteria was that I could choose. I customized my meal, bypassing all the items I didn't want that day. I was in charge.

Who's in charge?

Cafeteria Christianity has the same appeal. I (the consumer) get to choose what I find attractive at any given time, in any particular church, and bypass the rest. What's not to like?

It's not surprising that this "pick-and-choose" mentality has been joyously adopted by American Christianity. In a culture where the consumer is king, it's only to be expected that living as a Christian has become a commodity, just another opportunity to assert your right to be in charge—as the paying customer.

Money has become the means of asserting choice in the Church, just like in the supermarket. You could call it the "Publix-ication" of religion (Publix being our favorite Florida supermarket). Thinking about the money we may give to a church, if we choose it as our church home, has turned us from co-laborers in Christ's kingdom into potential customers, with their own preferences and demands.



From <http://www.free-online-recipes.net/>

Christianity Lite

The American Church's perfectly normal human response to the commodification of Christianity (and the shift in perspective from seeing itself as a gathering of saints who want to serve God to seeing itself as being in the business of attracting paying customers) is to make itself more marketable.

- *If the busy family has little time on Sunday for a long church service (or little inclination to wake up early, drag everyone into the car to go to church and make Dad miss a beautiful morning's round of golf), then the church should move the family-oriented activities to Wednesday night. It's just too bad if this fragments the church, separating the young from the older folks who like Sunday morning church.*
- *If the Christian emphasis on gladly sacrificing one's plans and preferences in order to serve God is too challenging to a culture that glorifies self, then shift the emphasis to the "selfish" aspects of God's grace: His peace, His blessings and His forgiveness. Downplay or even eliminate the commandment to ignore self, as Christ did, in order to take up your cross and follow Him. Focus on what you get out of being a Christian, not what you put into it*
- *If the parts of being a Christian that repelled His followers still repel people who want life to be sanitized and bland (such as Jesus' remark that anyone who would not drink His blood and eat His flesh could not be His disciple), then slide your tray right past that blood and flesh—stick with the jello.*

Reinvent-the-wheel” Christianity

When I was in my 20’s, in my back-to-the-land decade of life when I was off the electric grid, my then-husband’s father once asked us, “Why do you want to reinvent the wheel?” He was an engineer and had spent his career building on the scientific theories and knowledge of other engineers. It seemed ludicrous to him that we would forego the pleasures of technology by choice. Why not take full advantage of what already exists?

In the same spirit, Cafeteria Christianity too often rejects 2000 years of Christian life, preferring to go back to the Bible (“sola scriptura”) and laboriously building a new structure for the Church.

As an intellectual exercise, this is great fun, of course. There’s nothing so invigorating as devising a perfect system, one that will avoid the faults and shortcomings of the existing way of doing things.

In fact, this relish in slaughtering the sacred cows in any part of life is distinctively American. With what glee did the Liberty Boys dress up as Indians (uncivilized savages—another American icon) and toss the tea overboard into Boston Harbor, as a protest against the British colonial government? Americans can seem like toddlers on a rampage, tearing down just for the sheer joy of destruction.

But what you tear down must be rebuilt, if you want an institution to have a future. So the effort to tear down historic denominational Christianity, which has been very successful in the past two decades in the United States (see box at right), cannot be the end of the story. You must build again, in a way that suits your new, “up-to-date” perceived needs (the need

to attract paying customers to the Cafeteria Church).

But isn’t it a bit counterproductive to throw away two millennia of work by sincere, committed Christians? Is it necessary to start all over again in everything?

I know Christians who would love to have an entire parallel universe of “Christian” organizations that replace the already-established institutions of the secular world. Many Christian schools fall into this universe—I’ve heard it said that Christians should establish their own educational systems, right up to replacing the College Board’s SAT tests for college admission with Christian SAT’s. Why? These institutions already exist.

Is reinventing the wheel the best use of the resources God has given us?

A Cafeteria Bride?

The Church, according to St. Paul, is the Bride of Christ. Spotless, pure and holy, the Bride awaits the coming of the Bridegroom.

It seems to me that a bride doesn’t want her reception in a cafeteria. She wants to choose the best meal possible, to thank her guests for their presence at her wedding. She doesn’t leave it up to the guests to choose their own meal, allowing them to bypass the essentials in favor of the jello. She wants to give them the best, not what they may happen to want that day.

The wedding represents the high point of the Bride’s life—her being joined to the Bridegroom. The Church is the Bride of Christ, awaiting His coming again while living out His life on earth.

On the glorious day that He arrives, is it really appropriate to serve Him Jello?

David Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University, recently wrote in **Opinion: The future of American Christianity:**

“I think we will witness (are already witnessing) a winnowing process in which weak, ineffective, or maladaptive churches and religious organizations are simply going to die. Congregations will close, parachurch organizations and schools will shut down, and entire denominations will fold or merge with others. Creative efforts will be required everywhere to forestall this fate.”



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