

Church Shopper

Like the French, we Americans live in, to borrow from Claude Polin, a “me-first” society. Each and every man is the measure of all things, his own arbiter of that which is beautiful, true, and of good report. Reared on the Disney principle (*You can be whatever you want to be, or, Be true to yourself, or Listen to your heart*—all variations on a me-first theme), we approach “culture” like a hungry shopper. And the customer is always right.

So it goes with religion. Only in America could the term *church shopping* be coined. *What church do you go to? Oh, we’re church shopping right now.* True, the amoeba-like sectarianism of American Protestantism makes the ground more fertile (*If you don’t like your church, start a new one!*), but this phenomenon is hardly confined to Protestantism. Idealists of all backgrounds shop till they find the perfect church—the right blend of preaching (self-help, hellfire), worship (your musical taste), and multigenerational ministry (childcare, youth ministry, Golden Agers’ Prayer Breakfast).

And we advertise: *Looking for an unashamedly fundamental, King James, mission-minded church? Visit us this Sunday at . . . Or: Tired of worship that doesn’t speak to your heart? You’ll love our contemporary service! Or: Tired of video monitors and praise bands? You’ll love our traditional service!*

Weary church shoppers more familiar with today’s market hunt for the best value for their dollar. If you find a service with (insert your genre preference) music, you may be willing to settle for a church with less-than-stellar Kiddie Kare or Children’s Church. Or, if a “vibrant youth ministry” for your awakening Britney or Fiona or Avril is what you have in mind, you might settle for an average praise band. The market is always changing, however, as are customer needs, and any church that sits on its hands in the “culture” department (or doesn’t realize that “lost people matter to God,” as church-growth guru Bill Hybels puts it) may lose valuable members to another ministry.

When, as a teenager, I interviewed at a very cool “men’s” clothing chain at the mall, the manager, gauging my aptitude

for selling skinny ties and rayon suits, asked me, “When you walk by a store, what’s the first thing you see?” I stammered out the answer, “What’s . . . in the front?” “Yes!” he replied, as if I had just hit on the Greatest Marketing Principle Ever. “We put the latest, hottest things right in the front [genius]—at the lowest possible price—but then, you know what? We upsell! You must have the socks that go with that! Do you have a bolo tie? Our jeans are two-for-twenty-five this week, by the way!”

Get them in the door—that’s the marketing strategy aimed at today’s church shopper. Then, you upsell him with a deeper commitment: life, salvation, forgiveness—something more expensive. If you try hard enough, you can steal that shopper from his regular store, and you’ve got yourself a repeat customer.

Today, denominations are often viewed as brand names, known by what is displayed in the front window. *Catholic* (increasingly associated with pedophile priests, thanks to the media) means “stand up, sit down, go up front, take communion” and is often associated with the “monotony” of reading “rote” prayers (not from the heart). *Baptist* invites Yankees to speak in a “Southern accent” and make fun of “Pastor Billy Bob” who thinks you’ll go to “hey-yull” if you drink a beer. And *Lutherans* are largely known by Garrison Keillor’s Woebegonians—frumpy, melancholy, unfriendly, and acutely interested in gossip and two-cheese (both American) potato casserole.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is trying to change that image, though, through a fantastic marketing/missions campaign. President Gerald (“Jerry”) R. Kieschnick’s Ablaze!™ (speaking of “hey-yull”) program, launched in 2004, is an effort to stem the tide of declining membership in the conservative church body by “changing its culture.”

Ablaze!™—the vision of igniting a worldwide Lutheran mission movement to share the Gospel with 100 million people, including 50 million in the United States. It is a movement because it could change the culture of our church. How? By fully engaging every member



in reaching the unchurched or uncommitted through the Seven Mission Responses: Go, Pray, Learn, Give, Tell, Send, and Celebrate. God wants all people to be saved and He has called His children to participate in the task!

To reach those 50 million Americans, the LCMS has provided her Ablaze!™ congregations with “Friendship Ablaze! Tools for Connecting Friends With Jesus,” which amounts to an entire marketing campaign, complete with advertising materials, lite-rock music, and video for four weeks’ worth of services. The first three weeks are designed to prepare the faithful to get their friends in the door on the fourth “Friendship Sunday.” And there are sermon resources (the full text, a mere outline, a PowerPoint presentation—you decide), including the Friendship Sunday sermon, “You Can Pick Your Friends . . .” When I saw that title, I just had to look, and, yes, it is a reference to the middle-school proverb, “You can pick your friends, and you can pick your nose, but you can’t pick your friend’s nose.” Under “Assimilation Resources,” we learn how to “prevent back-door losses” and to “keep the front door open”—which includes “establishing a minimum of seven new friends within the first six months.”

As of this writing, the Ablaze!™ count is up to 1,652,885 “people [worldwide] with whom the Gospel has been shared and reported.” (There’s a ticker online.) Only time will tell if the “assimilation process” has been successful, though, as church shoppers can be unpredictable. By treating souls as customers, we might just be reinforcing the me-first mentality to which they are accustomed, and they might be tempted to look elsewhere for a better product—unless we keep “changing the culture.”



By Any Means Necessary

Was there a point at which American liberals consciously adopted Jacobinism, or did it just creep up on them gradually? This question was brought into rather sharp focus earlier this year when the PBS series *American Experience* presented an expensive two-part documentary entitled "Reconstruction: The Second Civil War." The series recounted the story of Reconstruction, but with such a ferociously partisan emphasis that a Radical Republican of the 1860's might have blushed. Normally, we need not worry too much that even learned people sometimes get their history dead wrong—don't get me started on the demonization of the Middle Ages—but, in this show more than most, the implications for present-day policy were starkly, frighteningly obvious. The good people at PBS, together with a substantial section of liberal academe, evidently believe in their hearts that they are absolutely, infallibly right about the directions that American society should take, and they would like to see their preferences enforced with bayonets, if necessary.

The documentary repays careful watching, but the main themes that emerge can be easily summarized. The story as told is utterly free of complications or ambiguities. After the Civil War, we are told, the legal, civil, and social equality of former slaves had to be recognized and enforced, totally and immediately, without considering any possible obstacles that might arise in the form of legalities, republican or constitutional values, or the interests of the local community against those of the centralized liberal nation.

Governments elected in the Southern states were legitimate if they recognized black voting rights, even when those elections disfranchised substantial sections of the anti-Reconstruction white population (though the program ignored white disfranchisement). No matter how small the minority that a new government represented—45 percent, 15 percent—the regime was democratic if it reflected the correct social goals. These were the views presented by several leading historians of the era, including the aptly named David Blight, who condemns "the great myth of Reconstruction" that the radical regimes were in any way oppressive, however many white

Southerners were excluded from the process. Extremism in the defense of The Idea overrules all lesser objections. The program devoted vast attention to the story of some freed slaves who established an armed separatist republic on a small island, from which all whites were excluded. This cult-like exorcism was presented as an heroic model of black self-determination that should have been more widely imitated.

These social goals had to be preserved by whatever armed military force might be necessary to repress the intransigent evil-doers who opposed the juggernaut of historical progress. The program offered a somewhat ambiguous coverage of federal military rule in the South, at once asserting its necessity (How else are you going to govern those awful people?) and minimizing its reality (There wasn't really a military dictatorship, and, anyway, it was just a little one). David Blight again: "It really wasn't a genuine military occupation after 1868, in any sense of the term we've come to understand military occupations in the 20th century." Well, that's all right then. If the documentary presented the many Americans dubious about Reconstruction as anything other than servants of Satan, it was surely an oversight, which will be corrected in future editions of the program.

Were we to sit down amicably with the producers of *American Experience*, or the academic experts they consulted, I am confident we would not encounter a gaggle of hard-faced Stalinists. Where, then, did they find such ghastly ideas? I suspect it's a generational thing, highly characteristic of baby boomers. Growing up during the civil rights movement of the 1960's, they imbibed harsh lessons about the duty of liberal governments to enforce racial justice no matter what the opposition, or what holes were torn in the Constitution. Projecting these values back a century, liberals see post-Civil War Southerners as the George Wallaces and Lester Maddoxes of their day and suppose that those leaders, too, would have backed down in the face of a more determined federal assault. The failure to push the first Reconstruction thus led directly to a century of segregation, lynching, and repression.

This historical analogy is thoroughly flawed, most obviously because most



Northerners themselves in the 1860's were little less committed to white supremacy than their Southern compatriots were, and few Northern states practiced anything like the equal political rights enforced by Reconstruction regimes. Inevitably, Reconstruction policies were widely seen as heavy-handed retribution against the former Confederacy rather than any form of social justice. Also, not even the most forceful federal interventions of the 1860's involved the mass disfranchisement or political exclusion of the white South. Southern whites in 1860 were not asked to renounce their own stake in the political process but to allow blacks a share in the game.

Such caveats are lost on a generation that grew up with certain basic assumptions about the nature of justice, about the irrelevance of political processes or legal constraints that failed to advance this cause, and about the utter, sordid evil of the racist hypocrites who dared oppose the quest for progress. And that brings me to the appropriate label for the views expressed, which has to be "Jacobin." Shortly after PBS aired the Reconstruction series, the *London Review of Books* published Hilary Mantel's discussion of a new biography of Robespierre. Do these ideas sound at all familiar in the American context?

He never extended to his opponents the courtesy of believing them merely mistaken, or misinformed, or even stupid. In an emergency, such a courtesy is meaningless. . . . Robespierre deplored needless violence, but could persuade himself rather readily to see the need. Due process was too slow for his fast-moving instincts.

The book is entitled *Fatal Purity*, a term that can be usefully applied to Robespierre's modern American disciples. <C>