

Selling out?

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue



In Review

THIEVES IN THE TEMPLE

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MACDONALD

THE
CHRISTIAN
CHURCH AND
THE SELLING
OF THE
AMERICAN
SOUL



Thieves in the Temple

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald
Basic Books

In my first years in ministry, the senior minister I worked with had a policy of performing weddings for any couple that asked, whether they were connected to the congregation or not. He believed that this was one way to show hospitality to couples who did not attend church and who later might return to church as a result of that hospitality.

Since I was a newly ordained associate minister, the senior minister's policy became my policy. And due to my status in the hierarchy, I got stuck with most of those nonmember weddings. I came to dread them more than any other aspect of ministry.

The unchurched couples would order me around like any other service provider they had contracted with. They would bore me with rants about why they hated organized religion or why their wedding pictures would actually be much prettier if taken at First Congregational Church. And why, they wondered, couldn't the videographer stand in front of the cross and Bible to get the best shot of the ring bearer? Surely you can picture that ring bearer—too young to talk, with no idea what he is doing, dressed up like a little magician in satin and velour.

I could and did perform those rent-a-church weddings. But I hated myself in the morning. A few of these couples did show up again at church, but it was often to avail themselves of something else they regarded like a service for purchase—the sacrament of baptism. These new parents who had not attended church stood up to make promises they showed no evidence of intending to carry out.

I disagreed with my senior colleague about the value of providing those wedding services to nonmembers and vowed that I wouldn't perform them when the decision was left to me. And I have tried to stick to that policy.

Jeffrey MacDonald says that disciplines of that sort are rare in American churches. We have all watched churches grow to enormous sizes, some of them by throwing out the hard teachings of Jesus in favor of offering Christianity-lite entertainment. Small mainline churches are not immune to the temptation to bend over backward to meet people's desires. We think if we provide it and they like it, they will come. Conservatives and liberals share the same consumer orientation and the same temptation to put people-pleasing programs above disciplined faithfulness.

MacDonald's biting critique is must reading, even though it makes us wince. It encourages me to make my performance of weddings and baptisms count for something. To be honest, I've bent those rules for some members' grandchildren. I've compromised in countless other ways to make the Christian path a little smoother and a little more appealing to the new traveler.

The religious marketplace MacDonald describes is full of people looking for a church that meets their needs. MacDonald argues that we often don't know what we need, so instead we choose what we want—a faith that requires very little of us. What we need is a faith that requires commitment, sacrifice and the occasional denial of our own desires. People shop for churches that will meet their desires when they ought to be looking for a church that will *shape* their desires.

As it is, they have no intention of, for instance, letting the church shape their desire for a perfect wedding into a desire for a meaningful marriage supported by a community of faith. The little ring bearer, the focus of the wedding ceremony, often trumps Jesus. That dressed-up drooling toddler can't talk, can't demand anything and has yet to do anything that isn't cute. How can Jesus and the cross compete with that?

Jesus can't compete, at least among people whose only connection to the church is their videotaped wedding day. Jesus might be able to trump it among people who allow themselves to be shaped over time by the church. But how many churches are doing that hard work of shaping desires?

MacDonald views with disdain churches that ought to confront the sin of greed and instead preach a prosperity gospel in which Jesus becomes the magical genie who delivers wealth to those who trust in him. (This Jesus appears to deliver enormous wealth to the preacher as well.) In these churches, the generosity of the parishioners is linked to a quid pro quo system in which the giver is guaranteed a rate of return. But as MacDonald knows, Jesus never promised material benefits. He lived in voluntary simplicity and rejected the power of money and material things.

In one stinging section, MacDonald takes aim at church trips overseas, calling the people who take them "vacationaries." The work of long-term missionaries, who spend years overseas, is increasingly overshadowed by the efforts of small groups that go overseas for a brief experience that purports to serve others but is really, MacDonald says, all about the travelers' need to gain a sense of accomplishment. These mission trips meet the travelers' need to feel successful, either by winning souls or by being able to brag about the good they did—all without engaging the host culture on any meaningful level.

He reports on a neighborhood in Tijuana where children "have learned to pretend they've never heard the gospel," because church groups arrive every couple of weeks to shower them with treats along with messages about salvation. A former trainer of church youth leaders near the Mexico border observes groups that come in, run a vacation Bible school and lead the kids to Christ—and then it happens all over again. "Here the religious marketplace makes a mockery of the missions."

MacDonald promises to give redeeming examples of church, and in the end he does. Oddly, all of them are in Minnesota. He deliberately picks a mid-American city and

finds encouraging signs across the denominational and theological spectrum, including megachurches that go deeper into faith through small groups and college students who seek authentic experiences of faith when they go overseas on short trips.

At his best in throwing slings and arrows, MacDonald throws them with the passion of one who has tasted ministry and found it bitter, but who still cares about the church enough to improve it. His cranky, passionate scolding is worth the price of the book.

But the scolding does not cover the whole story. For example, Christianity has always had its embarrassing versions of the prosperity gospel—from the selling of indulgences, by which the church offered large donors a quicker trip through purgatory, to the current obsession with Jesus as providing a "get rich quick" plan. This sort of thing is not new in the church. When Jesus made Peter the rock of the church, he ensured that the organization would always have the capacity to be as flawed as its participants.

It also needs to be said that the church over the centuries has named the sin of greed and combated it. While the televangelists get the air time, most churches have worked to cultivate the virtue of generosity in quiet and humble ways, the most important being the "ask" every Sunday to share one's wealth and one's money and one's time with a bunch of nonfamily members we call the church.

And many churches work hard to make their mission workers more than "vacationaries." Even if the mission trip is short, these churches try to focus not only on the needs of the host community but also on the gifts and wisdom that the hosts offer. Rather than presume that others need our religion or our ideas, many church groups ask their hosts for guidance. While these trips are far from perfect, many of them treat the host culture with respect rather than condescension.

I remember a church trip to Guatemala on which we were told to keep to ourselves any comments on how the houses we were to help build might be constructed more efficiently. Our hosts knew that Americans were going to recommend using cement mixers and other techniques, but we were supposed to resist that temptation. They stressed that we were there not only to help but also to learn. It turned out that no one could ever get a cement mixer anywhere near the houses we were building on crowded hillsides, though that wasn't the sort of thing one could tell from first

glance. In that trip, the desire to feel good about one's work was challenged by the need for a generous spirit. Rather than try to make our mark, we sat with folks who made a mark on us. That is the kind of heart-changing work that the church should be about—and often is.

MacDonald discloses that he is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, and his book is stronger because of that experience. The examples from his own ministry make for good reading, and they are, for pastors, painfully recognizable. If pastors are to have their hands smacked, better that it be done by someone who has faced the challenges and even failed, as MacDonald admits he has in many situations.

But MacDonald's time in the parish was very short. He says that the very issues he writes about drove him from the ministry after only a few years. Missing from the book is the experience of hope that comes from the redemption of long-term service. When times are tough, I thank God that I have more than those early years in the ministry to sustain me. I wrestled a lot in those years with the hypocrisy of the church and the pressure to raise attendance and money, as well as the compulsion to meet everyone's needs. And there were those awful rent-a-church weddings that didn't seem to jibe much with the last course I took on liberation theology. If this was ministry, then there were many times when I was embarrassed to be associated with it. Sometimes I still am.

But I came to see more blessings than reasons for outrage. MacDonald might suspect that my core values have softened over the years and that I've been compromised and become complacent. But where does love fit into all of this judgment? There is work I can do as a pastor to shape the desires of my congregation because I have been with them more than two years and because I have done this work long enough to see desires get shaped and changed. I have even seen some of those rent-a-church couples join the church and follow through on those baptismal promises.

I still don't want to perform their weddings. But apparently the Holy Spirit has lower standards than I do.