

Unholy hype

Many churches & religious organizations are following the playbook of Madison Avenue & Dr. Goebbels

By

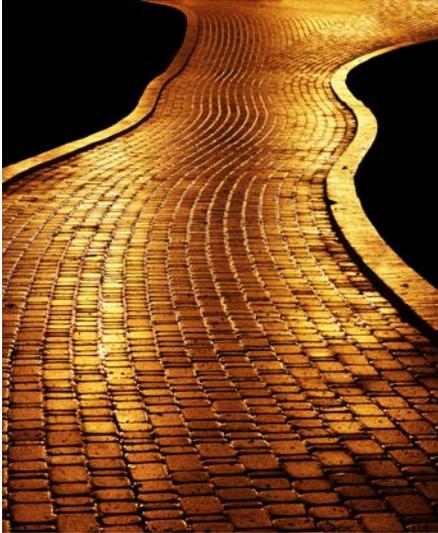
[Dr. Anthony G. Payne](#)

Few reading these words are unaware of the absurd level of promotional hype that exists in the church world today. You can't miss it because the jingles, slogans, branding language, and public relations output of so many ministries parallels that of secular organizations and especially product manufacturers and marketers. Indeed, it almost goes without saying that growth minded churches and organizations must aggressively bumper thump or promote themselves. The methods and insights Madison Avenue advertising geniuses came up with and refined over time have been adopted and adapted by church bodies and schools, religious charities and associations, and all kinds of church affiliated institutions. The fact US businesses invested more than 190 billion (U.S. dollars) in advertising (in the US alone) during 2016 (Source: Statista, the Statistics portal at <https://www.statista.com/topics/979/advertising-in-the-us/>) underscores the incredible demand to reach consumers and win their patronage.

However, what churches and other religious establishments have discovered is that highly effective advertising, public relations and marketing requires they bring something to the table that "outclasses" or "outmaneuvers" their "competition" or at least tends to make them stand out as especially worthy of a prospective parishioner or followers' time (and hopefully financial support). Instead of asking, "How do we best communicate the gospel and get people saved and then living lives that please God and bear fruit?", church leaders find themselves asking, "What program, music, music group, event, books, films, DVDs or presentations can we introduce or sponsor which will draw in the unchurched, especially Millennials?"

Those ministries, churches and religious organizations which work PR well typically grow and as a result their leaders naturally assume this is something God approves of and has blessed. So they invest more dollars in promoting themselves including hiring a PR firm or creating their own in-house version, and even shift their focus to sermons and books and such that focus not on sin, repentance and changing one's ways and growing in holiness, but instead extol God's promises and blessings and how to more surely exploit these





using faith and perhaps (verbal) confessions with little or no sacrifice, obedience or even the right motives.

This is exactly the kind of message that secular get rich quick entrepreneurs sell gullible people on all the time. Who among you has not heard an infomercial pitch in which the enthusiastic host repeatedly says something along the lines of “You deserve to be wealthy and if you believe and follow my plan (ahem) religiously you will soon be depositing six figure checks in your bank account!” (Cue audience applause and switch to someone in the audience who got rich using the sponsor’s magic program or plan).

Healthcare professionals too have even got caught up in the PR world of “form not substance” and then filled their websites with content that embellishes their accomplishments, credentials, the effectiveness of their treatments and even patient outcomes. And, in order to steer clear of making claims that might land them in hot water with the FTC or their governing professional board (if they have one), many have hired accomplished masters of communication, public relations, branding, marketing and even applied psychology to spin their website content, speeches and such.

What do I base these observations and comments on? Two things: (1) During the past thirty years I have done promotional writing and handled PR strategy and outreach for various healthcare professionals including some celebrity physicians, and have also contributed to the promotional efforts and marketing of various churches, church organizations and individual ministers; and (2) I have over time tracked the explosive growth of many denominational and non-denominational church bodies and associations while paying particular attention to their marketing methods, PR content and campaigns.

It helps that I have grown companies using my own promotional writing, news releases, videos, written speeches, radio scripts, radio appearances, papers, books, articles, web content, et cetera. One typical example is a southern California firm I joined which consisted of the owner-president, one part-time administrative assistant handling the books and phones and no other full-time staff but me, and a budget that had more red ink than most office supply stores have in stock. In less than four years time the firm’s profits were well above \$2 million per annum and no less than seven additional staff members had been hired to handle the workload.

Given my background, perhaps what I have shared above gels with your own observations and insights. How many large churches and church organizations have you spotted that has exchanged the Great Commission for a watered down gospel and Great Deception?

Let me take you a little further into what I seeing being played out especially in many mega churches and in the lives and preaching of more than a few televangelists.

What many of these PR virtuosos have done is bait the hook with something people find as irresistible as lotteries, horse races and mega prize contests: namely, “prosperity theology” which is to say the prosperity gospel. And it is so, well, utterly true blue American because it cherry picks God’s promises and marries them to entrenched American capitalist sentiments and practices. Of course, what I see happening is believers buying into a species of wishful and magical thinking which turns God into a faith-activated *Cosmic ATM machine* or *Father Slot Machine*.



This in my opinion has turned many ministries into religious Ponzi schemes in which believers give more and more in the hope or fervent belief that God will bless them steadily up the proverbial material pyramid until they are as prosperous as their favorite preacher pitchperson. These hype bewitched folks appear to be oblivious to the fact that these prosperity preachers and teachers have transformed Yeshua HaMashiach (“Jesus the Messiah”) and his message from that of an itinerant rabbi who spoke unceasingly of how the rich have a very hard time making heaven into a prosperous potentate who wants every believer to get stinking rich. I suspect most who buy into this gospel of greed wind up profoundly frustrated, disappointed and then disillusioned. Not unlike people who buy into secular Ponzi schemes.



But whether a hype driven ministry gets into prosperity theology or not, what I have also noted about them is a penchant for spinning what amounts to propaganda and for conducting meetings and music events that incorporate elements which parallel those used and even perfected by the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei which is rendered in English “Nazi Party” and operated from 1920 into 1945 in Germany) and its firebrand propagandist, [Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels](#) (Photo left). And while I am almost certain few of these ministries even know they are using music, props and speeches in ways that mesmerize crowds and actually play into the hands of ministers and others who seek and enjoy the spotlight, they have

nonetheless managed to do so.

From How Hitler Conquered Germany

By Nicholas O'Shaughnessy

Adapted from the book Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand by Nicholas O'Shaughnessy. Published by C. Hurst & Co.

- In historian Aristotle Kallis' view, the identification of propaganda with falsification is misleading: Propaganda is a form of truth "reshaped through the lens of regime intentions.
- The idea of people willingly misled offends our notion of man as rational. A more accurate representation of the psychology of the Third Reich would be to conceive of a partnership in wishful thinking in which the masses were self-deluded as well as other-deluded.
- The purpose of Nazi propaganda was not to brainwash ordinary Germans, and it was not intended to deceive the masses even though it did enable the movement to gain new recruits. The principal objective, according to historian Neil Gregor, was "to absorb the individual into a mass of like-minded people, and the purpose of the 'suggestion' was not to deceive but to articulate that which the crowd already believed.
- Nazism did not ask for belief but for surrender—not through coercion, primarily, but by assaulting consciousness. The essential aim was the extinction of independent thought via images that would now think for you.

Is it any wonder that some mega churches and evangelical organizations have devolved into personality cults whose leaders are seduced by their own egos and base desires?

My final or parting word for readers is this: Many Americans including believers have been seduced by those who adroitly combine hype (including language that borders on or is outright deceptive), fear, manipulation and exploitation (both subtle and crass) with appeals to greed, ego and so-called "enlightened self-interest". And while the US government has laws on the books to help keep the pitches of retailers, healthcare professionals and others free of outright fraudulent claims and guarantees, some marketers and promoters busy themselves with either violating these or taking them to the limit. Truly consummate and effective religious hype-masters and spin doctors -- those who stay within the law in terms of not only how they pitch things but also what they do with donations -- often thrive and attract copy-cats. In my opinion though they do far more harm than their secular counterparts because their words and deeds can leave people not only poorer materially, but also spiritually.

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