



## **Writing Wrongs:** *The candyfloss world of Christian publishing*

**T**here is no question about it: you *can* still find good contemporary Christian books to read. However, the more discerning Christian reader, familiar with the titles making the Christian bestseller lists these days, may well be experiencing growing alarm at the reading preferences of the average modern Christian. The fact is, Christian bestseller lists today increasingly include a raft of titles that contain all manner of speculative imaginings, blatantly aberrant teaching, supernatural fantasy and outright heresy. The responsibility for the lack of Bible knowledge among modern Christians (Hosea 4:6) that has brought about such a situation, exposing Christians to the dangers of bad theology, rests primarily with church leaders. This is not here in question. However, we need also to focus on the role played today by the Christian publishing industry. As a servant of the church, it too bears a considerable responsibility, as do its customers, before God, for the appallingly bad theological materials flooding the Christian marketplace and polluting the Christian mind.

The question is this: is the Christian publishing industry merely bowing to market forces, in giving the Christian public 'what it wants'? Or has the industry itself become so independent of the church it is supposed to serve, that it is today guilty of serving another god altogether – and thus is guilty of playing a *de facto* lead in aiding a modern apostasy of the church?

### ***The modern Christian publishing industry***

It is the American Christian marketplace that leads the rest of the world both in publishing trends and in book-buying generally. A recent survey in the USA found that a half of all Americans claim to have read a Christian book in the last year, with one-third of American adults actually buying a Christian book (other than a Bible) during the year<sup>1</sup>. According to this same survey, 'surprisingly substantial numbers of people not usually favourable toward Christianity – such as atheists, the unchurched and people aligned with other faith groups – read Christian literature'. All of this may surprise, but the more important question remains: is what is being published fulfilling the biblical mandate for all Christian teaching to help build up and edify the body of Christ, the church in the world? Or is the Christian publishing industry rather helping Christians to 'heap up for themselves teachers' who, in print, will help them 'turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables' (2 Tim. 4:3-4)?

Some years ago I conducted an enquiry within the Christian publishing and distribution network here in the UK on behalf of a concerned Christian publisher. I spoke to leading lights in the industry as well as to a number of independent booksellers. It quickly became apparent that all were deeply concerned at the direction of modern Christian publishing and bookselling in the UK – and that no

one wanted to go on record to talk about it. It was apparent that each of them feared repercussions from a growing elite in the British Christian publishing and retail world. In a similar investigation in the USA back in 1997, Lutheran theologian/author Gene Edward Veith found exactly the same scenario being played out there. Reporting his conclusions in 'Whatever happened to Christian publishing?' in *World* magazine, Veith stated: 'only one source was willing to be named...all others spoke under conditions of confidentiality, because they legitimately fear a kind of excommunication from the tight knit industry'. In the UK, the main complaint from among the fast diminishing band of independent evangelical booksellers concerned the 'great pressure' they considered themselves to be under to conform increasingly to an industry which wanted them to stock what suppliers wanted them to stock, not what they themselves wanted to stock. Theological considerations, which mattered to most of those to whom I spoke, were steadily being eroded in favour of marketing pragmatism, with all sorts of financial inducements being introduced to encourage compliance. Failure to conform would simply mean already squeezed profit margins disappearing altogether. The likely result of that was either takeover by the bigger chains, or closure. But how had it come to this?

In the USA, where the largest Christian publishers are based, the problem began in the late 80s/early 90s with the story of two big publisher buy-outs. First, the Zondervan publishing house was purchased by Harper Collins, after a buy-out attempt by Zondervan employees failed, in 1988, failed. Harper Collins was a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's secular media empire. Second, in the early 90s, Thomas Nelson publishers purchased Word for a reported figure of \$72 million in cash, according to a report in *Business Wire*. The now secular-owned Nelson-Word had become the world's largest Christian publishing house. Veith reported that the merged Nelson-Word companies were now 'a single corporate reality, owned by stockholders'. He added: 'Secular ownership poses special problems for Christian publishers. Church-related companies can ask questions about an employee's faith, but publicly held or secular operations are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion. Thomas Nelson and Zondervan are the big two of the Christian bookselling industry.' The prime concerns for these companies now, as observers noted, became the need to conform to secular business practice and to perform for its secular investors.

By the mid-90s, *Christianity Today* magazine was reporting enormous growth in Christian book purchasing generally, with a '92 per cent boost that moved religious books from a 5 to 7 per cent market share'. How much of this was due to the 'big boys' and their new market policies and practices, is impossible to say. But the financial clout and growth of these two secular-owned companies undoubtedly led to them making a significant impact on the wider Christian publishing industry, as the industry's market leaders. Numerous smaller, formerly church-based and/or family owned and run publishing houses were also swallowed up by them and by other growing publishing groups. Where once independent booksellers took seriously the matter of exactly *which* books they were prepared to sell, it was becoming far more judicious, as Veith says, to 'take advantage of their supplier's offer to ship only those projected to be top-selling titles'. As Veith points out, however: 'This sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy, as books that might well have turned out to be strong sellers never make it to the shelves, while the books given special favour by the publishers and wholesalers are the only ones available for customers to buy.' With the majority of the world's Christian books being published in the USA, it is unsurprising that marketing deals struck with distributors and booksellers around the world would be greatly influenced by the policies and demands of an industry whose decision-making process, in many of its major board rooms, was no longer Christian at all.

At the other end of the spectrum, many Christian publishers devoted themselves to meeting consumer demand for whatever, theologically, it might want. And, just as the worldly predilection is for the spectacular, the mystical and

the prophetic, so too it proved to be for the shallow, largely untaught, modern believer (Matt. 16:4). Thus, as the contemporary church of the 80s and 90s accrued its array of false teachers and false prophets, so too their writings became much in demand. Suddenly, the appetite for books about signs and wonders, miracles and healing, Christian psychology and a burgeoning obsession with end-time prophecy, meant that books on the subjects were selling in their millions. And they made their authors – and publishers – some of the wealthiest in history. In meeting the enormous demand for such books, Christian publishers could at least claim they were giving the church what it wanted. The trouble was that the editorial decisions to publish such books often had more to do with financial expediency than theological integrity, especially in the case of the secular-owned companies. New publishing houses, built around the cult of a new church leader, were set up. Many publishing houses had now also become independent of the orthodox denomination that had set them up. In this climate, with publishers now being freed from the constraints of the church and orthodox theology, they set about producing Christian literature that utilized Christian language and imagery, but was desperately thin theologically.

Between those who perceived the secular influences seeking now to *lead* market trends and those Christians following market trends by 'giving the people what they want', the result was the same: greater industry profit, on the back of the dumbing down of biblical knowledge and spirituality. The bestseller lists, and the popular, sentimentalized, candyfloss Christianity that now dominates them, are today a transparent indicator of how the modern Christian publishing industry is largely failing the true church. Indeed, it has reached the stage today where it would be remiss of a mature Christian to direct young converts to the local Christian bookstore *unescorted* – such is the predominance of flashy-looking but dangerous spiritual dross on many of the shelves.

Returning briefly to my enquiries in the 90s, however, one further and particularly unpleasant aspect of a modern cartel-like approach in Christian publishing came to light. In the early 90s Hank Hanegraaff, President of the US Christian Research Institute, had written his ground-breaking *Christianity in Crisis*, published by Harvest House. The book was severely critical of a whole raft of 'Christian' (in fact Word-faith TV evangelist-style) leaders who were teaching the heretical and self-serving, but highly popular, prosperity gospel message. It was to the credit of Harvest House that the book was published at all, as it was one of the first to provide a thorough and well researched exposé of this heresy. Indeed it appeared at a time when virtually the whole of the Christian publishing industry appeared unwilling to publish critiques of many new aberrant teachings, apparently deeming such critiques 'too negative', while the false teachers themselves seemed to find no trouble in finding publishing outlets<sup>2</sup>.

Originally published in the USA in 1992, *Christianity in Crisis* won the Gold Medallion Award for Christian literature from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (EPCA) in 1994. Strangely, for such a top selling title, however, by late 1994, the book had *still* not been made available in the UK. After contacting a number of Christian distributors about this, an employee of one of the largest, in an unguarded moment, informed me that 'it was not being stocked because it criticizes some of our other authors'. What matters for our purpose here is that the book itself was known to the employee and his group, and also that it had been actively discussed and rejected by them as a suitable book for sale. After pursuing the matter with other distributors and after raising it also by an article in the Christian press, one company did eventually agree to look into the matter, and ultimately did make it available in the UK<sup>3</sup>.

### ***The good, the bad and the plain ugly***

More recently, we have only to review the monthly bestseller lists to note the grim reality of a spiritually impoverished Christian publishing market. At the time of writing, Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* sits atop the bestseller lists in

both the USA and the UK. This is Warren's follow-up to his blockbuster *The Purpose Driven Church*, published by secular-owned Zondervan. There were various other spin-offs, including *The Purpose Driven Life Journal* (at no. 11 in the US top 50) – publications which have plainly made a tidy sum for both Zondervan and Warren. The problem is that Warren's beliefs and practices regarding what constitutes 'church', are biblically unorthodox and run counter to the historic consensus as to what the church is. Warren's concept is, in fact, entirely similar to that of yet another in-demand pastor and author, Bill Hybels of the Willow Creek Association of churches. Both Warren's and Hybels' approaches are predicated upon the 'seeker-sensitive' model, which rejects the historic and biblical model, which is God-focused – the gathered community of faith where teaching is geared to discipleship and growth, and worship is in spirit and truth. Hybels and Warren, however, stand the biblical approach on its head by choosing to make their churches man-centred, where all of the teaching is geared to meet the 'felt-needs' of a largely unbelieving congregation. By rejecting the apostolic church tradition (Acts 2:42) designed for spiritual discipleship of believers, and substituting it with a sinless, inoffensive gospel in a non-confrontational religious environment designed primarily for evangelism (see Don Matzat's excellent 'Guiltless Good News: the deformed theology of seeker sensitivity', *CRN Journal* no. 5), they have both undermined the biblical nature of a church. Unsurprisingly, in pandering to 'felt-needs' rather than real needs, their messages were highly successful in drawing in crowds, especially disaffected church-hoppers keen to remain anonymous in the large congregations<sup>4</sup>. As usual, whenever something works pragmatically, everyone else wants to get in on the act. What better way than to spread the new gospel than by publishing millions of 'how you can do it too' books?

In recent years we might also highlight the propagation of other spiritual fads. At time of writing, Tim La Haye's *Armageddon: The Cosmic Battle of the Ages*, the *eleventh* book in the author's 'Left Behind' eschatological fantasy series, has come onto the bookshelves. Indeed, it is also the book of the month for the major UK distributing house, STL. Seen as a 'crossover book' (books that appeal to Christian and non-Christian alike), this entertaining but highly misleading fantasy series and its myriad spin-offs, based specifically upon La Haye's aberrant dispensational premillennialism, have sold in their millions. At the time of writing, the Left Behind official website has just announced yet another new deal to produce a 'Military and Political' series with Tyndale House Publishers in the USA.

And fantasy end-times scenarios are not the only big sellers in the Christian marketplace. Fantasy prayer-lives have also made the grade. The biggest has come in the form of the cultic *The Prayer of Jabez*, written by Bruce Wilkinson and published by Multnomah Publishers. Alighting on an Old Testament prayer uttered by a man named Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:9-10), Wilkinson rips this simple and obscure prayer from its true biblical context, claiming, by mantra-like repetition, that it is *the* key to helping Christians achieve a far more dynamic prayer life and indeed greater influence and personal success<sup>5</sup>. By 2002, Wilkinson's little book had sold so many copies that it had become the first in the history of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association to win the coveted Book of the Year Award *twice*, let alone in consecutive years<sup>6</sup>.

That there are good and decent Christian publishers is not in question. But, in considering here some of recent best-selling 'evangelical' titles, it is difficult to believe that the concern of many is genuinely to help build up the church: rather it is surely to build up their own profit margins. Even some of the better publishing houses can be a 'mixed bag'. The excellent Crossway Books, which publishes so many fine evangelical titles, also publishes the Frank Perretti spiritual fantasies. Harvest House, once a bastion of evangelical orthodoxy, publishes some of Tim La Haye's non-fictional materials<sup>7</sup>. And, as we have seen, once fine companies like Tyndale House in the USA are getting in on the Left Behind act. The InterVarsity Press in the USA<sup>8</sup> has also published countless

strong evangelical publications, helpful to those involved in student life and interested in the impact of secular culture. But, in recent years, IVP (USA) has also been in the vanguard of publishing the megashift theology of Clark Pinnock. Pinnock is a leading proponent of the heresies of Open Theism (in which God does not know the future) and Soteriological Inclusivism (in which people may be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ).

Tertullian's *Against Marcion* and Iranaeus' *Against Heresies* are just two examples of Christian books written to meet the theological challenges of the early church. A mix of aids to Christian worship and living, and polemics against potentially invasive error in the church, has been the common fare of the New Testament church era. In this way, Christian literature has reflected the Scriptures, in stating both the positive – that which the church *does* believe – and the negative – that which it *does not* believe. But this is not what is coming out of the Christian publishing houses, by and large.

As we have already seen with the example of Hank Hanegraaff's book, there is a marked reluctance publicly to oppose and expose false teaching and false prophecy today. That, it seems, is deemed 'too negative'. But pouring forth a stream of unorthodox or just plain heretical works is, it seems, justifiable. On top of that, we witness a conveyor belt of well meaning, 'positive', but ultimately innocuous Bible commentaries (to add to the growing mountain we have already), vague devotionals and sanitized biographies (see Gaius Davies's article in this issue). There is little, however, which helps the church to scratch where it is actually itching. Even the republishing of great Christian classics *on its own* will not do that job, as some believe it will. Yet here is the *real* need. As Martin Luther observed, 'If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest expression every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ.'

While aberrant teaching flourishes, spiritual dross all too often fills the shelves of our Christian bookstores, when what the church really needs are contemporary books taking up contemporary issues that apply the Word to every area of life. We need books written by Christians who not only know their Bibles, but also their church history too, and are well able to engage with the political, cultural and spiritual issues of the day, by bringing the power of the Word to bear on them directly.

### ***So who is to blame?***

So who specifically is to blame for this sorry state of affairs? Is it the once creditable Christian publishing houses, which now prefer to fiddle while the church burns? Or, are Christian publishers merely responding to the selfishness of many in the modern church who desire nothing more than to satisfy their own felt-needs? I cannot better Gene Veith's own conclusion in the article quoted earlier:

While consumerism, the profit motive, and survival of the fittest are good for the realm of economics, they should not rule theology. Jesus, who drove the salesmen out of the temple, warned about the impossibility of serving both God and money. The apostle Paul could have been describing today's religious marketplace: 'For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). But a marketing-approach religion requires "suiting desires" that because of the Fall are innately evasive of God. Religious consumerism involves "scratching ears" by telling the customers only that they want to hear, instead of the Word of God they need to hear.' The Christian marketplace thus follows the lead of the world's pop culture.

The fact is that *all of us* bear a responsibility here. Christian publishers have a responsibility to the church whose members they ought to help to edify and build up in the faith. But publishers do not bear the responsibility *alone*. When it comes to what we buy to read and imbibe as truth, each of us also bears a responsibility for what we imbibe as Christian consumers. In a multi-chapter diatribe against 'prophets who prophesy falsely' and 'priests who rule by their own power', the great prophet Jeremiah also implies responsibility for those who imbibe falsehood as truth as well as those who deliver it, when he says: 'my people' reveal that they 'love to have it so' (Jer. 5: 31). Later, Jeremiah observes: 'And as for the prophet and the priest *and the people who say*, "The oracle of the Lord!" ' (italics added). When it comes to written, as well as spoken, truth, it seems plain that our Father holds each of us responsible for that which is delivered, and that which is received, 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:23-4). Christian publisher *and Christian reader* then both bear a responsibility before Christ – for do not those who are truly spiritual 'judge all things' (1 Cor. 2:15)?

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<sup>1</sup> Press release by the evangelical Barna Research Group, dated 27 January, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> It was for this very reason that some of us set up the Christian Research Network in the UK, as a way of ensuring that proper biblical critiques were published, when evangelical publishing houses here failed to respond to their threat.

<sup>3</sup> Hanegraaff's *Christianity in Crisis* was eventually distributed in the UK by Word Books.

<sup>4</sup> A unique and fascinating study (with unprecedented full access provided by the Willow Creek Association of churches), *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Church in a Nontraditional Way* (Rutgers University Press) by Kimon Howland Sargeant, is highly revealing concerning the whole seeker-sensitive concept of church. It shows how the make-up of seeker churches is decidedly dependent upon the membership of disaffected Christians, especially former Roman Catholics (40%), who are drawn primarily, as he reports, by the undemanding, self-help messages, together with the virtual anonymity that they enjoy in seeker-church life.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough critique, see Professor Mark Talbot's detailed critique 'God, Prayer and Evangelicalism: A review of The Prayer of Jabez' in *CRN Journal*, issue no. 15.

<sup>6</sup> *The Prayer of Jabez* won the ECPA's Book of the Year Award in 2001 and 2002, was in fact ghost-written by David Kopp, Multnomah Publisher's editorial executive. Yet Kopp was nowhere credited on any of the early editions of this book.

<sup>7</sup> La Haye's *The End-Times Controversy*, being one of their titles.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that IVP (USA) and IVP (UK) are independently run organizations.

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