

## Article

### Faith-Learning Integration Exercise: Marketing Principles in the Book of Acts

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*In his study of Acts, Karns finds that the elements of the marketing mix—product, price, place, and promotion—are evident in the expansion of the early church. His Bible study can be used to help students integrate their faith with the marketing discipline.*

#### Abstract

This paper presents a learning exercise that fosters the integration of Christian faith and the marketing discipline. The learning exercise is a structured Bible study of the Book of Acts, identifying connections between the growth of the early Christian church and various aspects of marketing. In particular, elements of a strategic marketing plan, including market segmentation, positioning, and the elements of the marketing mix (product, price, place, and promotion), are evident in the expansion of the early church.

#### Introduction

Faith-learning integration (FLI) is a multi-faceted process and goal for Christian educators.

It ranges from personally modeling Christlikeness in interpersonal relationships with students, to identifying moral dilemmas and applying Christian principles in their resolution, to exploring the points of agreement/disagreement between Christian principles and the principles of a discipline, critically evaluating a discipline's paradigms and values from the perspective of Christian faith. Ultimately, it involves developing a deeper understanding of Christianity, a growing congruity of personal values and actions with Christian values, and coupling all of life's pursuits with the central pursuit of faithfulness to God (Hasker, 1992; Holmes, 1987).

The learning exercise described in this paper,

“The Growth of the Early Christian Church: Marketing Principles at Work in the Book of Acts,” explores the points of agreement/disagreement between Christian principles and the principles of a discipline portion of the FLI spectrum. It helps students explore points of connection between marketing and the scriptural account of the growth of the early church. It is also helpful in addressing students’ often strongly negative perceptions that marketing and persuasion are inherently un-Christian. Seeing evidence in Scripture that many of the core principles of marketing are actually employed, not utterly decried, allows students to see that marketing can be other than just sleazy advertising. Students should be greatly encouraged by this legitimacy. (To be sure, there are many marketing practices that are not in keeping with scriptural Christianity, but to see some use of core marketing ideas in Scripture is refreshing.)

The exercise has been created to assist business/marketing educators and students at Christian colleges and universities in response to the need for more faith-learning integration exercises (Karns, Gustafson, & Surdyk, 1999).

It could be used in an introductory marketing class, but may be better suited to students who already have a basic understanding of marketing. The exercise engages learners in thoughtful study, discussion, and reflection about the connections between principles of marketing and principles of Christian faith. It is also hoped that students will see some legitimacy for core marketing principles and draw parallels for contemporary church marketing activities.

The learning exercise draws upon Acts as a case study of the growth of the early church. The exercise poses discussion questions to guide students’ study of Acts, helping them to observe principles of marketing at work in the account of the establishment of the early Christian church. While there is no record of the development and use of a strategic marketing plan by the early church fathers, describing the situation, mission, goals, and strategies of the early church provides an opportunity to explore the links between marketing principles such as market segmentation, positioning, and the four “P’s.” Ideally, students would be given a copy of the exercise in advance and come to a class session devoted to

discussing their answers to the discussion questions. Alternatively, the discussion questions could be assigned to correspond with course topics spread across the course. A teaching note with suggested answers to the discussion questions is provided.

It should be noted that any attempt to pair Christian Scripture with a specific discipline may be taken as an inappropriate hermeneutical approach to the biblical text (Lynn & Wallace, 2001). It is hoped that this learning exercise brings meaningful and faithful integration into our classrooms and sufficiently guards against misappropriating Scripture. In this case, God’s plan and provision for expanding the reach of the gospel includes evidence of what the marketing discipline has identified as several key principles of marketing.

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## APPENDIX

### The Growth of the Early Christian Church: Marketing Principles at Work in the Book of Acts

#### Overview

This learning exercise is built upon a study of the Book of Acts as the basis for a faith-learning integration discussion about the employment of marketing by the early church fathers. It is intended to help you to understand the growth of the early church in terms of a strategic marketing plan, to explore some ethical questions about marketing, to consider the legitimacy of marketing, and to draw parallels for contemporary church marketing activities.

#### Marketing Principles

As a reminder, there are a number of important principles in the marketing discipline. First among them is the idea that the purpose of marketing is to develop exchange relationships that provide value to customers and meet the goals of both the marketing organization and society. Understanding customers' viewpoints about the value they seek in the products or services they purchase is necessary in

order to develop such relationships.

Marketers recognize that different types of prospective customers see their own needs differently and that these different types of customers may be more or less likely to purchase. Accordingly, marketers try to discern these differential market segment preferences and then determine which, if any, of the segments would be best to attempt to serve. Furthermore, the products and services offered by marketers should conform to the preferences of the selected target market. It is vital to offer more value to the prospective customer than the competition does.

A product or service that is attractive to one market may not be attractive to another. The marketing approach will need to be adapted to the new target without compromising the product's attractiveness to the original target. This may necessitate operating as distinct products (brands) rather than as one brand.

Prospective customers must be aware of a product, must be convinced of its worth compared to the other ways they might meet their needs, must be able to afford the product, and must have access to a source of the product.

#### Acts

The Book of Acts is an historical account of the establishment and growth of the early Christian church, continuing Luke's narrative begun in his Gospel. In Acts, we see that, as promised by Jesus, the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, and we learn about the work of the Holy Spirit. Acts then recounts the martyrdom of Stephen, the conversion of Saul, and the ministries and associated miracles of Peter, the apostles, and several evangelists. Theological differences between the Jerusalem church (Jewish Christians) and the growing church based in Antioch (Gentile Christians) and how these differences were addressed are also discussed. Much of the book describes Paul's missionary journeys and the "global" expansion of the church.

#### Marketing Principles at Work in the Book of Acts

Please consider the following questions about the early church and the connections to several key marketing principles that can be observed as you study Acts.

#### Mission

What was the mission of the early church? What is the mission

of today's church? (See Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:45-49.)

#### Marketing Environment (SWOT Analysis)

What opportunities and threats faced the early church? What strengths and weaknesses of the church, as an organization, were evident? (See Acts 2:5-12; 4:29-31; 6:11-14; 8:1-5; 9:15; 13:44-47; 18:5-11; 19:23-27.)

#### Goals and Core Marketing Strategies

What were the church's primary goals? How did the church attempt to achieve them? (What were the core marketing strategies?) (See Acts 1:8; 13:4; 13:14; 16:9-10; 17:16-23; 19:8-10.)

#### Target Markets and Customer Profiles

Which groups of people were available for the church to reach? Which groups were the target markets of the church? What key issues probably faced each type of person as they might have considered professing faith in Christ? (See Acts 8:1-5; 10:1-3; 10:27-29; 10:34-48; 11:19-24; 13:4; 13:14; 16:9-10; 17:2-3; 20:17-24; 23:11; 28:17-31.)

### **Positioning**

What value proposition describes what the church was offering to people? How would people have perceived the church compared to Judaism, Greco-Roman polytheism, and atheism? (See Acts 4:12; 5:30-31.)

### **Marketing Mix**

Just what were people buying into? What benefits did they get from accepting Christ and joining the church (product)?

What price did they have to pay?

What were the church's communication goals? What was the message (copy points)? How was persuasion attempted? How did the church get its message out (media)?

How did the church make itself available to the people (distribution)?

What specific adaptations were made for each target market as the gospel was taken to "foreign" markets (globalization)? What adaptations were not permissible? (See Acts 2:29-41; 2:46-47; 3:6-16; 4:12-21; 5:7-11; 5:19-20; 5:32; 5:42; 9:32; 15:22-29; 17:2-3; 17:16-32; 19:11-20; 28:17-31.)

### **Evaluation**

What criteria were used to evaluate the church's effectiveness? How effective was the church's strategy? Why?

### **Lessons Learned**

Is marketing inherently un-Christian or is there some legitimacy for it, even among Christians? Why? What are some limitations that should be put around it?

What lessons about contemporary church marketing efforts can be learned from this account of the establishment and spread of the early church? In what ways should church marketing differ from the marketing plans and activities for "secular" goods and services? Are relationships with God and with a local people best understood as exchange relationships?

### **Teaching Note**

#### **Introduction**

This learning activity uses the Book of Acts to explore the connections between the expansion of the early Christian church and several principles of marketing. There is no specific mention of a "marketing plan" given to or developed by the church fathers, yet throughout

Acts the application of many principles and strategies seen by marketers as key principles may be observed.

### **Learning Objectives**

- To integrate marketing with Christian Scripture and faith
- To explore connections between the growth of the early church and several key marketing principles
  - Market segmentation and selection:
    - Positioning
    - Globalization
    - To explore ethical issues in marketing and its legitimacy for Christians
  - To explore the use of marketing as a tool of outreach and church growth

### **Classroom Use Suggestions**

This learning exercise has been used successfully with advanced undergraduate students in a marketing management course. It could be used to launch a class session on church marketing or it would work well in conjunction with segmentation or marketing strategy discussions. Discussion could be focused on one class session or spread across a term corresponding to various marketing topics.

The exercise could be used in an introductory marketing course as part of the discussion of and the development of strategic marketing plans.

### **Answers to Questions**

*What is the mission of the church?*

The mission of the church, as given by Christ in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), is to make disciples of all nations. This required the church fathers to engage in evangelization, moving people from unawareness of the Good News to repentance. It also required teaching and supportive exhortation to produce obedient faithfulness and fruitfulness. All the efforts of the apostles, evangelists, and pastors occurred in partnership with God's work through the Holy Spirit.

Generally, Acts 2:42-47 serves as a major foundation for understanding the purposes of the church, then and now. As Rick Warren puts it in his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, the five purposes of the church are: worship, prayer, evangelism/outreach, discipleship, and fellowship. Out of these underlying purposes, the church often has also taken on the role of advocate for moral

conscience and the role of agent for social justice/compassion.

*What was the marketing environment (SWOT analysis)?*

See Figure 1 on page 119.

*What were the church's primary goals, and which core marketing strategies were used to achieve the goals?*

See Figure 2 on page 120.

*Identify the market(s) available to the church and the target market(s).*

There are various ways to segment the “market” available to the early church. The most obvious is by culture and geographic location. Responsiveness is another factor that is important in understanding the market segments. Jews and “responsive” Gentiles were the primary “target” markets. Opportunistic as well as intentional targeting was evident. In all, the plans of the evangelists were guided and revised as needed by the Holy Spirit. Figure 3 on page 121 shows one possible way to characterize a grid of market segments.

*What were the key “coming to faith” issues facing persons in each market?*

See Figure 4 on page 122.

*What value proposition describes what the church was offering to people?*

The church was offering the news that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that through belief in Him and repentance one could be saved from sin (restored relationship with God).

*Illustrate the church's positioning compared to Judaism, Greco-Roman polytheism, and atheism in the minds of people on an attribute-based perceptual map.*

There are several ways to characterize the perceptions of people, and the views would be different for Jews, Christians, and “pagans.” The nature of God, the nature of a person’s relationship with God, and various benefits of fidelity to God are reasonable starting points. Two possible examples are shown in Figure 5 on page 123.

*Briefly describe the church's offering in terms of a marketing mix.*

Product

Salvation/restored relationship with God is the core

Figure 1

<p><b>Strengths:</b> God’s hand was with them</p> <p>Passionate commitment of apostles and evangelists</p>	<p><b>Weaknesses:</b> Low awareness</p> <p>Limited (from human perspective) resources, human and financial</p> <p>Intangible benefits and claims were difficult to prove (requires “leap of faith”)</p> <p>Dissension/factions within the church—grace vs. law (Judaizers, Hellenists, Jerusalem vs. Antioch)</p>
<p><b>Opportunities:</b> Large population of unreached people (Jews and Gentiles) spread across the known world, reachable via existing transportation and communication networks</p>	<p><b>Threats:</b> Persecution from Judaism</p> <p>Persecution from the ruling Romans</p> <p>Various entrenched pagan religions—local economies tied to religious rites and symbols</p> <p>Materialistic indifference</p>

Figure 2

Goal	Core Marketing Strategy	Example
Outreach/Growth	Market expansion	The church expanded to new cities throughout the known world.
	Market development	Paul spent extended time educating the Ephesians about the Way.
	Adaptation of marketing mix elements (“glocalization”)	In Athens, Paul related Christ to their unknown god.
Loyalty (Fidelity)	Market penetration	Peter continued preaching in Jerusalem.
	Relationship marketing	Paul communicated with the various established churches through messages, letters, and visits across the years.
	Member development (discipleship)	Various new converts grew in faith and commitment, becoming deacons, pastors, and evangelists themselves.

Figure 3

<b>Markets:</b> Culture	Gentiles-Pagans Greek Roman Syrian Other	{Asia Minor; Greece; Italy; Egypt; Spain; etc.}	{Urban; Rural}	{High; Moderate; Low}
	Samaritans	Palestine		{High; Moderate; Low}
	Jews	{Palestine; Asia Minor; Greece; Italy; Egypt; Spain; etc.}	{Urban; Rural}	{High; Moderate; Low}
Geographic Area				
Responsive				

Figure 4

**Key “Coming to Faith” Issues**

**Jews**—Issues about Messiah’s restoration of Israel as a geo-political kingdom; the validity of claims about Jesus being the Messiah; defensiveness about being labeled as enemies/murderers of Messiah; self-identification as God’s chosen people.

**Samaritans**—Issues of class conflict with the Jews; superstitions.

**Greeks**—Intellectual superiority; superstitious; pantheism.

**Romans**—Political superiority; Caesar worship; pantheism.

“product.” Additionally, the good news that Jesus is the Christ and the restoration of relationship with God the Father through Christ the Son, with comfort, guidance, and enabling from the Holy Spirit, are provided. Practical ministry to meet felt needs is also provided.

No product modifications or adaptations of the core product (doctrine) were allowed (heresy).

Price

Grace is free, yet each individual had to confess sins, admit dependence upon God, deny himself/herself (death to self), and take up the cross of Christ and follow Him. Repentance meant leaving the “old ways” of life behind and growing in

obedience/fidelity to God. Submission of self and resources to care for the needs of others could be seen as an element of sacrifice as well as benefit. Persecution was a very real price for professing Christian faith.

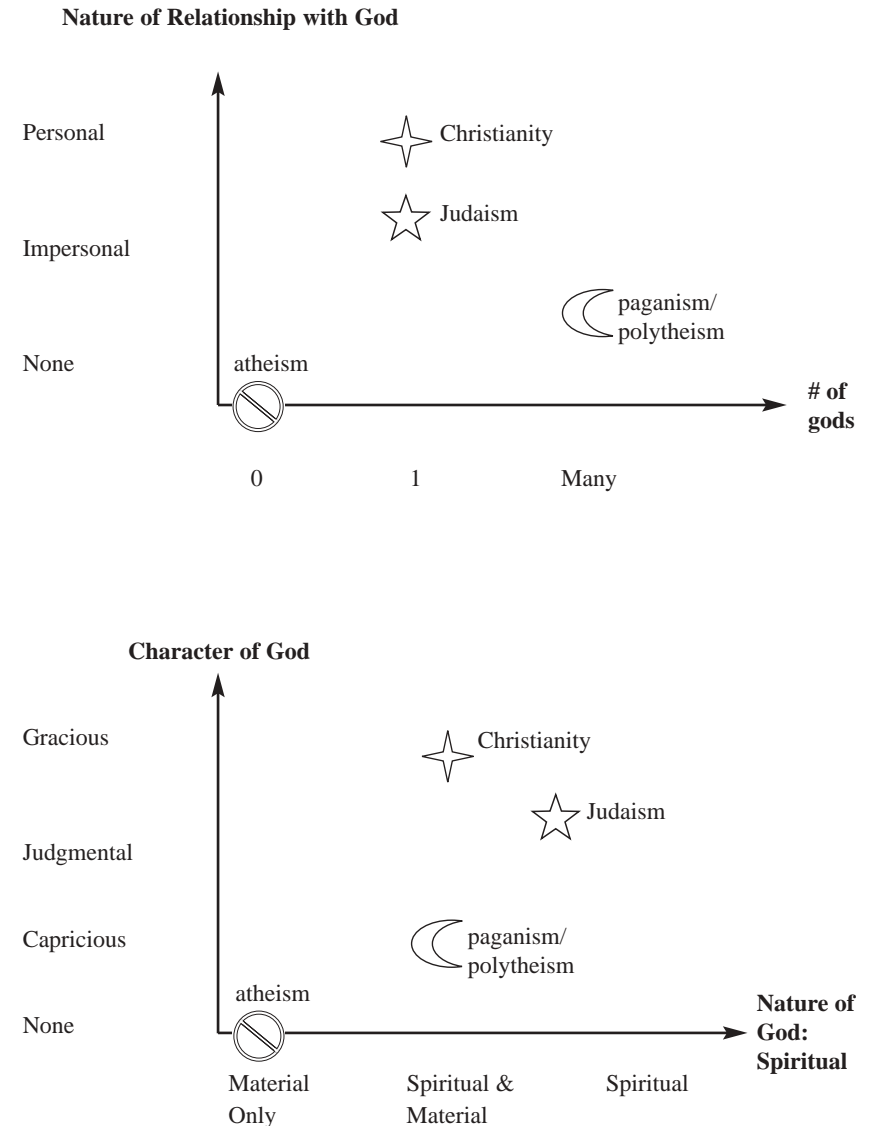
Promotion

Many means of communication and persuasion were used, including personal selling (proclamation/witnessing), events, miracles, testimonials, and word-of-mouth. The media of the day were employed (i.e., face-to-face and written letters).

Distribution

This is not an example of multi-level marketing and should not be seen as providing a

Figure 5



scriptural basis for multi-level marketing. It is rather more like the use of agents as distributors. Itinerant agents (missionary evangelists) produced local church groups that provided on-going meeting places and enabled local agents to penetrate the local market. Fidelity of the agents was paramount.

The structure of the value network can be seen in Figure 6 on page 125.

*What criteria were used to evaluate the church's effectiveness? How effective was the church's strategy?*

Evaluating the effectiveness of the church should be based on the church's mission. Success was seen in being faithful (loyal agency) in attempting to make disciples, regardless of how many new people actually responded to the message. Growth did occur, for which the early church fathers gave thanks to God. This did indicate to them that the message was bearing fruit and that God was drawing people to the gospel. Further, the deepening commitment of people to the faith was occurring and this was also seen as indicative of the church's effectiveness in making disciples.

The strategy proved to be effective as the church grew

tremendously despite persecution, materialistic indifference, and entrenched pantheism. Christianity spread widely and became a major element of Western civilization.

*Is marketing inherently un-Christian? Is there any legitimacy for it?*

While it is very important to be careful about misappropriating Scripture by reading the text through the marketing lens, it appears from Acts that many basic ideas in marketing are legitimate. To be sure, the practice of marketing strongly reflects the fallen nature of the world. There are countless examples of materialism, deception, manipulation, exploitation, and immorality in modern marketing that do not correspond with biblical teaching. Yet, the underlying principles of serving the needs of others, investing with the expectation of return, adapting for different "markets," and the use of persuasion, for example, are evident in Acts.

*What lessons about church marketing can be learned from this case?*

A major point of emphasis in Acts is that the growth of

Figure 6

Value Network Element	Role in the Value Chain	Value-added
God-Christ-Holy Spirit	Creator; Initiator; Savior; Lord; Comforter; Guide	Salvation; the way of restored relationship with God; forgiveness  Guidance and encouragement for Christian living and empowerment for ministry
Agents— angels  - apostles and evangelists - Christian believers individually and in local churches	Messengers  Witnesses	Encouragement  Teaching; testimonials; role-modeling; exhortation; encouragement
Persons	Recipients of grace who may choose to profess faith in Christ as Savior and Lord	Worship of God; witnessing; fellowship and encouragement of other believers



the church was a result of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The apostles were giving witness, but God was bringing the growth. So, it is important that church marketing reflect the basic agency role that Christians have, working as witnesses in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Church growth programs should be responsive to the perceptions, understandings, and needs of the people that are being reached, but the core message may not be changed, nor should a consumerist model be adopted. The goal is always to bring people into contact with the gospel.

Engaging people and their needs “where they are” with love, grace, humility, and patience works. Persuasive efforts are appropriate.

*In what ways is church marketing different than marketing for secular goods and services?*

A major difference is that the church is empowered by God to accomplish His purposes, namely “making disciples.” The power of God is involved in evoking a response to the gospel of Christ that may not be present in a person’s response to other goods and services.

People are not in the same consumer role in their relationship with God or the church as they are with other goods and services. The relationship with God is not merely an exchange relationship; rather it is an intimate, love relationship.

Another difference is that the core product, the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection, is not open for adaptation in the church as it is with other goods and services. To do so is heresy.

*What lessons about marketing can be learned from this case?*

Segmentation is useful. (It should be noted here that in contrast to secular marketing which may choose to serve only preferred target markets, the gospel of Christ is not exclusively available only to potentially lucrative markets.)

A “glocalized” approach to international marketing is quite viable. Maintaining a common brand or product identity with adaptations for local markets was employed.

Persuasive communication—“selling”—is not unethical. The apostles were deeply engaged in persuasive communications (personal selling) in order to build awareness and preference for the gospel.