

Mimetic Desire and the Discipline of Marketing: Implications for Marketing Practitioners

DAVID BURNS

Kennesaw State University

YVONNE SMITH

University of La Verne

ABSTRACT: Much of the research on business from a Christian perspective can be equated to attempting to justify business practices instead of truly examining them within the context of biblical thought. This paper examines the discipline of marketing and its key construct of desire in relationship to Scripture. In doing so, several potentially troubling questions are raised.

KEYWORDS: marketing, desire, mimetic desire, original sin, faith integration, Christian education

INTRODUCTION

Burns and Fawcett (2012) explored the questions arising from the marketing strategy/tactic of building strong brands within the perspective of the realities of Christian faith. What they observed was disturbing. Their analysis suggested a connection between strong brands and idol worship, specifically that strong brands may act as a substitute for a relationship with the real God. This analysis, however, was limited to the single marketing strategy/tactic of building strong brands. These observations suggest that a deeper examination of the foundations of the marketing discipline and the propositions upon which it rests may be valuable for Christian marketers who are interested in understanding how their daily work relates to Scripture. The intent of this paper is to advance that process by examining a presupposition that is fundamental to the discipline of marketing. The paper concludes by exploring the ramifications of the issues discussed for marketing educators and practitioners.

The importance of understanding presuppositions has long been understood by readers of this journal; the relation of the scriptural norms and assumptions underlying business disciplines is a frequent topic (Dupree, 2015). This is a necessary step in biblical integration in business, or the process of relating the elements in the business world to “the Truth given to us by God, primarily in the Bible, but also in life and in church practice and history”

(Smith, 2005, p. 155). Although some may assume that business disciplines are religiously neutral (Carter, 2017) or that faith can be effectively integrated into the business world through prayer, witnessing, and isolated applications, most understand that faith integration is much more. Faith integration consists of Christians being able to see how faith pervades everything they do, including the very foundations and assumptions upon which their daily work is based (e.g., McMahone et al., 2015). This thorough understanding of biblical integration gives Christians the means to not conform to the patterns and methods of the world but to provide them with the ability to transform their discipline to subsequently transform the world (Dockery, 2018; Hendricks, 2006).

The purpose of the paper, then, is to continue an examination of the assumptions and foundations of the discipline of marketing by focusing on one of its key assumptive constructs—desire—and examining it in the light of Scripture. The satisfaction of desire forms the basis of marketing (Belk et al., 2003). Hence it is imperative that desire is investigated and understood. First, the place of desire within marketing will be discussed, examining it within the perspective of Rene Girard and his understanding of the biblical narrative. Second, the role of desire in Scripture, from Eden to the cross of Christ, will be explored. Finally, conclusions relating this issue to Christian marketing practices will be suggested.

DESIRE

Within marketing, it is widely understood that its core is the exchange (Bagozzi, 1975)—an action undertaken with the goal of satisfying the needs and desires of the parties involved (Hill & Martin, 2014). Although they are often grouped together and viewed synonymously by some, it is important to note that needs and desires are two very different concepts when explored within the context of consumer culture. Within consumer cultures—cultures identified by a belief that the marketplace is the ultimate source of satisfaction (Easterbrook et al., 2014)—the needs of most individuals, such as food, shelter, and clothes, are readily met (Belk et al., 2003). Consequently, within these cultures, most purchases are made in response to desire, not need (Burns, 2010). “Needs are anticipated, controlled... and gratified through logical instrumental processes. Desires, on the other hand, are overpowering; something we give in to ... and totally dominate our thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Belk et al., 2000, p. 99). This suggests that, in a consumer culture, the primary purpose of marketing is the satisfaction of consumers’ desires to achieve non-economic outcomes (Burns, 2010).

This is not to say that needs do not drive individuals’ behavior within consumer culture but that these needs are often ultimately manifested as desires. The need for liquid and resulting thirst, for instance, is generally not simply met by the intake of water but is manifested as a desire for the intake of a particular type of liquid, such as a particular brand of soft drink, a specific branded water, etc. Likewise, the need for shelter is generally not met by the acquisition of a tent, tarp, or a minimal shack-like structure, but is manifested as a desire for a much larger house, laden with comforts that are often viewed as “necessities” (comforts that were not available to even the most wealthy a century earlier).

As a core construct in the discipline, desire has received a significant amount of research in marketing over the years (Burns et al., 2017). Surprisingly, many studies on desire do not actually define the term or provide definitions that are overly simplistic. Kavanagh et al. (2005), for instance, define desire as an “affectively charged cognitive event in which an object or activity that is associated with pleasure or relief of discomfort is in focal attention” (p. 447). Hofmann et al. (2012) define desire as a “wanting to have or do something” (p. 1319). Such definitions assume that desire is an internally generated state based on an individual’s cognitively based private

tastes and preferences (Kozinets et al., 2017). Indeed, in consumer cultures, this popular understanding of desire is one of the most widely espoused marketing “truths” (Kaplan, 2016).

Research, however, as well as marketing practice, finds inconsistencies with this understanding (e.g., Burns, et al., 2017). Contrary to popular conceptions, desire does not appear to be an individually based experience; instead, evidence suggests that desire arises from others (Smith, 2009). Specifically, research and practice suggest that desire arises from interpersonal origins based on the perceived desire of others (Tomelleri, 2015). The evidence suggests that desire possesses external origins—desire is mimetic, based on imitating and copying others (Girard, 1977). This contention will be explored further.

The Mimetic Nature of Desire

The essence of the mimetic origin of desire is that desire is not an individually generated state, but is “learned” by observing what others appear to desire (Gruenler, 2021; Stirling, 2004). Girard illustrates this by describing the behavior of small children. The desires of small children are often aroused and directed by the presence of perceived desires of other small children. To the wonder of many parents, a toy that may have been previously rejected by a small child, becomes suddenly desirable in the child’s eyes when he or she views another child expressing interest in it. Girard’s thesis is that adult desires arise and gain direction in the same fashion as they do for small children (Girard, 1997b; Hamerton-Kelly, 1994). Similar to the desire of small children, when adults view another person desiring a particular product (often by observing the other’s acquisition and possession of the product), their desire for the product is aroused (Kaplan, 2016). Hence, the desire does not originate from one’s own conscious thought, but it arises and becomes focused toward a specific product simply because the product is perceived as being desired by another (Stirling, 2004). As Tomelleri (2015) says, “The life of our desires is a life shared with the desires of others” (p. 72).

That one’s desires originate from the perceived demand of others, the essence of mimetic desire, is not foreign to marketing research and practice (e.g., Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Veblen, 1897). The role of the perceived desires of others in the formation of one’s own desires is well-recognized. Indeed, this mechanism can be seen in fashion adoption/diffusion, reference groups, branding, and many other fundamental marketing concepts (Burns, 2010).

Since desire does not arise from within the individual, but rather from the perceived desires of others, then it is “interdividual” instead of individual in nature (Golsan, 2002). “Rather than simply arising spontaneously, either through an act of subjective will or due to the inherent attraction of a particular object, desires are evoked by the conduct and attitudes of others towards objects” (Daniels, 2009, p. 91). The perceived internal individual source of desire, then, is merely an illusion (Huegerich, 2021). Instead, others are the source of and provide direction for, an individual’s desires (Harter, 2013). (This is referred to as the triangularization of desire, consisting of an individual, another, and an object of desire (Newell, 2012)). The key to mimetic desire, then, is that objects of desire are not chosen by an individual but by another; the imitation of another “determines the object of desire and not the other way around” (Lawtoo, 2013, p. 13). See Bailie (2002) and Palaver (2013) for an in-depth discussion of this reality.

Before proceeding, it should be acknowledged that although mimetic desire is most easily seen within the context of acquisition and possession of products (which is the focus of this paper), products are not the only sphere in which desire operates (Girard, 1977). Mimetic desire operates in all areas of adults’ lives, including such diverse areas as the selection of a mate (as has been illustrated by numerous situation comedies over the years), color and design preferences, choice of recreation, and choice of career field (Burns, 2010). C. S. Lewis (1947) notes that mimetic desire can even be seen in the area of ideas. Indeed, the number of areas affected by mimetic desire is virtually endless (Smith, 2009). Consequently, Grande (2015) concludes that mimetic desire is a primary driver of the majority of the actions and choices of most individuals in consumer cultures. Because of its widespread application, Wallace and Smith (1994) refer to mimetic desire as a “basic human drive.” In fact, Livingston (1992) suggests that a failure to understand the mimetic nature of desire may be a fundamental blind spot of many researchers in the social science disciplines, including marketing.

The Target of Mimetic Desire

It is not the object itself toward which mimetic desire is directed, but the symbolism that is ascribed to the item (Girard, 1977). Observing another desiring a product imbues the product with meaning since the product symbolizes the essence of the individual perceived to desire it. This reality is well recognized in marketing (e.g., Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006). In a consumer culture,

the symbolism associated with products is a primary reason for purchasing most products (Ferreira & Scaraboto, 2016; Thompson & Loveland, 2015). What is being purchased is the meaning associated with the item—the essence of another’s being (Girard, 1977).

Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being* [emphasis added], something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. (Girard, 1977, p. 146)

The importance of possessions in a consumer culture, then, is not based on their capacity to satisfy physical needs but rather on their capacity to establish and communicate an individual’s identity (Ferreira & Scaraboto, 2016; Thompson & Loveland, 2015). “Knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions as ourselves.... That we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior” (Belk, 1988, p. 139). Indeed, it is widely understood that the symbolism associated with products is used as building blocks for individuals to construct a self or identity (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Ferguson (1992) suggests that when

consumption becomes conceivable as the desire for, as well as the desire of, the self ... we then seek, in consuming such objects (products), to incorporate an idealized self, to make the self more real, and to end the inner despair of not having a self. (pp. 27, 28)

Therefore, the worth of an item is not the physical benefits provided by it but what another person is perceived to have gained from the item. A product viewed to be desired by another person is perceived as possessing the very personhood of the desiring individual (Tomelleri, 2015).

The increasing desire of the object leads to intensified efforts on the part of the subject to possess it. Consequently, the model’s resistance intensifies, and the perceived value of the object is reinforced. The value of the physical object becomes more and more “imagined” until all connections to its original value is lost. (Palaver, 2013, p. 124)

The personhood of others reflects “the good life”; it represents the ideal to be sought. The lives of others are viewed through rose-colored glasses. (The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.) In addition, marketing presents idealized pictures of the supposed lives of

others—individuals with carefree lives with no problems. “The hip, happy people that populate television commercials are the moving icons of the consumer gospel, illustrations of what the good life looks like: carefree and independent, clean and sexy, perky and perfect” (Smith, 2009, p. 95). Individuals’ desire is directed toward this “good life” and imitating those who are viewed as possessing it is viewed as the way to acquire it. “Thus we become certain kinds of people; we begin to emulate, mimic, and mirror the particular vision that we desire” (Smith, 2009, p. 54). “The person goes in search of someone whose life is more like the one he envisions for himself” (Harter, 2013, p. 42). The search process and the choice of a target, however, are entirely unconscious (Lawtoo, 2019). This allows individuals to believe the falsehood that their desires are individually based.

To summarize, given the mimetic nature of desire, an individual’s desire is roused by the perceived desire of another; we desire what another desires (Girard, 1977). Because the product choices and acquisitions of others are used to construct an individual’s self (Shaw et al., 2006), the target of desire is symbolic rather than definitive (Miller, 2004; Vaughan, 2002). Consequently, desire can be attached to and directed toward virtually any item (Corrigan, 1997). As Skerrett (2003) remarks, “[W]e desire before we know what we want” (p. 793).

The Competition Nature of Mimetic Desire

Mimetic desire is inherently competitive (Tomelleri, 2015), giving rise to the well-recognized inherently competitive nature of consumption (Jardine, 2004; Pooler, 2003; Schor, 2004). Desire seeks to acquire the nature of another. Consequently, it is ultimately driven by feelings of envy toward the rival (Tomelleri, 2015; Wharff, 2007). The product choices of the rival are perceived as his or her essence, embodying the rival’s very being (Fleming, 2004). The choices of one’s rival, then, become the model for one’s desires and sets the stage for an environment of ever increasing consumption, leading to a state where desire tends to be largely unsatisfiable (Miller, 2004; Twitchell, 1999), producing many negative consequences, such as pride, discontent, envy, and feelings of emptiness.

Within mimetic desire, referent others serve as rivals. Referent others, a classic concept in marketing, are individuals or groups who provide a frame of reference from which an individual makes evaluations (Schulz, 2015). Within the context of mimetic desire, referent others serve as rivals and, consequently, as the targets of desire. Rivals can take various forms, including neighbors, colleagues,

groups, famous celebrities, or images created through marketing activities (Burns, 2010). Because referent others serve as the targets with which individuals compare themselves, “the life of each of us is the story of our relationships... with the persons whom we deeply desire to be and whose gestures and style we accordingly imitate” (Tomelleri, 2015, p. 72). This comparison drives many consumption choices (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Tanner et al., 2008).

Mimetic desire is especially pronounced within consumer cultures (Nagpaul & Pang, 2017). With surplus discretionary income and with a reliance on the marketplace as a primary place to develop one’s self, such cultures provide individuals with countless referent others to act as models with whom they can compare themselves. Individuals are presented with a myriad of opportunities to perceive others desiring various products. This, in turn, allows individuals to view those products as the means to acquire the images associated with products in the marketplace in order to improve themselves relative to others (Burns & Warren, 2009). Veblen’s (1897) conspicuous consumption is a form of competitive consumption based on the desire to out-consume others. Hence, “there is a spreading consensus that much, if not all, consumption has been quite wrongly characterized as involving processes of need fulfillment, utility maximization, and reasoned choice” (Belk et al., 2003, p. 326). Instead, consumption should be understood as a competitive undertaking energized by mimetic desire, leading to a state that is consistent with Kant’s “unsociable society” (Kant, 2009).

MIMETIC DESIRE AND THE BIBLE

Given the important role mimetic desire plays in marketing, it is important for Christian marketing practitioners to examine how mimetic desire is portrayed in the Bible. Examples of mimetic desire appear to be pervasive in the Bible. Girard (1997a) views mimetic desire not merely as a phenomenon found in the Bible, but as a foundation of biblical thought. Specifically, he proposes that mimetic desire is central to human freedom and to the doctrine of original sin. Echoing this, Sloterdijk (2002) refers to the concept of mimetic desire as the “scientific version of the doctrine of original sin” (p. 250). Although the question of why sin or evil exists is an important question, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the role of desire in original sin is the focus.

Desire and Original Sin

The fall of Adam and Eve is a clear example of the effects of mimetic desire (Schwager, 2005). In the account in Genesis, the serpent distorts God's words and, in doing so, presents God to Eve as a rival. The serpent begins by insinuating that God is withholding something good from Adam and Eve, preventing humans, specifically Adam and Eve, from being "like God." The serpent states, "Did God really say 'you must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1 NIV). Eve responds with a distorted view of God's restriction concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die," she replies (Genesis 3:3). "You will not certainly die," the serpent assures Eve, "for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4-5).

The agenda of the serpent was to disrupt the relationship between God and humankind by creating a division between them that echoed the division between himself and God. He did so by arousing mimetic desire to prompt humans to imitate God in an antagonistic way—to become "like God" using mechanisms not provided by God. The serpent insinuated that God is not the gracious giver of all things but is rather a capricious being intent on maintaining His own superiority. God was represented as being a rival to human beings, wanting to guard "His" position against "His" rivals (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). The serpent sought to enslave humankind within mimetic desire by causing humans to strive to take God's place by trying to rival God through their own efforts (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007) based on a counterfeit image of God. From the viewpoint of Adam and Eve, the desire for the knowledge of good and evil was not for a specific benefit, but the knowledge was viewed to be desirable because they wanted to obtain the very nature of God—to obtain His being (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). Augustine correctly regards this as an attempt to usurp the divinity of God (Palaver, 2013). The intent of the serpent was, and continues to be, to create in humans a relationship with God that mimics his own rivalrous relationship. Referring to the serpent's relationship to God, Isaiah writes:

You said in your heart,
 "I will ascend to the heavens;
 I will raise my throne
 above the stars of God;
 I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
 on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.

I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14).

What follows in the account of Adam and Eve is an illustration of the tendency of individuals to put the blame of mimetic desire elsewhere. Adam accuses Eve and God, and Eve accuses the serpent. The result is conflict, expulsion from Eden, and ultimately a long history of violent deaths of humans, beginning with Abel. This tendency to look to scapegoats is an inherent component of the theory of mimetic desire (Girard, 1989). (See Girard (1989) for an investigation into scapegoating.) The sin of Adam and Eve, then, had its basis in mimetic desire (Newell, 2012). As a result of the fall, mimetic desire not only pervades the relationship between God and humankind but also the relationships between humans (Palaver, 2013). The dramatic escalation of conflict and violence depicted in the book of Genesis illustrates how this perverted view of God led directly to competition and rivalry among humans.

Schwager (2005) argues that the serpent's temptation of Jesus in the New Testament follows the same path as the temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden but with a strikingly different result. When speaking to Jesus in the desert, the serpent again distorts God's word and presents a false image of God by presenting God as a rival and by depicting himself as the ultimate authority instead of God. Jesus, however, does not fall into the trap of developing mimetic desire toward the Father. Rather, He recognizes and affirms who God is and His relationship with Him (Luke 4:1-13). Subsequently, through the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as addressing the issue of mimetic desire and its harmful effects, directly picturing it as sin and as something that has no place in the life of a Christ follower. Examples include the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31) and Jesus' rebuke of the apostles when James, John, and their mother requested the place of honor beside him in heaven (Matt. 20:20-28).

IS MIMETIC DESIRE NECESSARILY SINFUL?

Based on the apparent connection between mimetic desire and original sin, it would appear that mimetic desire is inherently sinful. Indeed, in one of his earlier works, Girard (1987) states that "following Christ means giving up mimetic desire" (p. 431). However, some suggest that this is not necessarily true. Steinmair-Pösel (2007), for instance, states that mimetic desire may, at times, actually be good; what matters is the object and the nature of that

desire. The notion of the positive side of mimesis, though often overlooked, is gaining increased attention (Adams, 2000). For example, in the story of creation, the Bible reports, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:27, 31). The originally created relational qualities of humankind, including the instinct to imitate others, are not inherently evil. Indeed, these are among the primary qualities that reflect the image of God and differentiate humankind from the rest of creation.

As would be expected, the relational qualities of humankind, including the instinct to imitate others, is also recognized in non-biblical sources. Aristotle (1997), for instance, stated “The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lesson; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in the things imitated” (p. 6). Similarly, Augustine (2003) stated, “The human race is, more than any other species, social by nature and quarrelsome by perversion” (508). Indeed, Augustine’s theology had significant influence on the development of mimetic theory (Palaver, 2013). Neuroscience also affirms that the primary biological difference between animals and humans is humans’ imitative relational abilities, primarily resulting from mirror neurons (Iacoboni, 2008). Consequently, humans have a unique ability to imitate others. Lawtoo (2017) goes further to equate mimesis with neuroplasticity; imitation provides the basis for the brain to change and to be adaptable. Hence, research suggests that humans do not learn to imitate but are born with this quality; it is innate (Kaplan, 2016), and, hence, it cannot be turned off (Smith, 2009). Girard (2007) goes so far as to propose that mimesis is what constitutes humankind, and it is through mimetic desire that humans seek transcendence (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). Smith (2009) draws a similar conclusion. Girard (2001) states,

It is mimetic desire that distinguishes the human person from animals, which are determined by their instincts. It is mimetic desire that makes a person receptive to her/his fellow human beings as well as to the divine: If our desires were not mimetic, they would be forever fixed on predetermined objects; they would be a particular form of instinct. Human beings could no more change their desire than cows their appetite for grass. *Without mimetic desire there would be neither freedom nor humanity.* [emphasis added]. Mimetic desire is intrinsically good.... If

desire were not mimetic, we would not be open to what is human or what is divine. (pp. 15-16)

Mimetic desire, although directly connected to original sin, appears to also be essential for relating with God. Similar to most forms of sin, mimetic desire is based in something that is good but has been warped and misdirected. The mimetic relationship between humankind and God is reflected in the famous passage from Augustine’s *Confessions* (*Confessions* 1.1) where Augustine (1961) states, “Because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you” (p. 21). Thus, humans are built for transcendence; the ultimate end of the human yearning is God (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). Thus, in this sense, what brings us to God is also that which takes us from God. One can conclude, therefore, that mimetic desire is inherently good since it is a foundation of humanity and it is what opens humans to their creator. Given its centrality, however, it is also the primary point of attack by Satan. Ultimately, the issue lies in where our focus is directed.

It [mimetic desire] is responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it. Our unending discords are the ransom of our freedom. (Girard, 2001, p. 6)

Choice of Model, or a Choice of Two Roads

Hence, it appears that imitation, in and of itself, is not something to be renounced (Palaver, 2013). Whether mimetic desire leads to rivalry or whether it leads to a correct relationship with God depends on where individuals focus their attentions (Aquinas, 1972; Augustine, 2003). As Girard (1988) states, “[C]hoice always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine model” (p. 58). If individuals imitate a human model, the model invariably becomes a rival and conflict will result. If individuals imitate a divine model, conflict need not result as long as the model is not imitated in a greedy or competitive fashion (Girard, 2001).

Dante states:

Because you make things of this world your goal,
which are diminished as each shares in them,
envy pumps hard the bellows of our sighs.

But if your love were for the lofty sphere,
your cravings would aspire for the heights.
And fear of loss would not oppress your heart;

the more there are up there who speak of “ours,” the more each one possesses and the more Charity burns intensely in that realm. (as cited in Alighieri, 1985, pp. 162-163)

It appears that the imitation of God by humans can take two forms (Augustine, 2003). The first form is similar to what occurred with Adam and Eve in the garden, where the imitation takes on a competitive nature where God Himself becomes the rival and the goal is to imitate God’s position—to be “like God.” Given that such rivalry with God was the source of the fall of humankind as well as the fall of Satan, the negative outcomes cannot be over emphasized.

The second form of imitation is reflected in the following statement by Palaver (2003):

Once you are caught up in the maelstrom of antagonistic mimesis (with other individuals or directly with God), the only way out consists in creative renouncement, in being prepared to yield everything to your rival. (p. 280)

He further states:

According to Girard, Jesus is the only role model who does not instigate violent struggle among those who imitate him: since he knows no “conflictual” desire, it is impossible to fall into rivalry with him over any object. Jesus leads us to God, whom he teaches us to imitate just as he does: “The Son can do nothing on His own, but only what He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). (Palaver, 2013, p. 219)

This form of imitation involves the imitation of the attributes of God—to follow the humble, loving steps of Jesus. This form, then, is where one totally yields one’s will to God in imitation of Jesus, who totally yielded His will to the Father. Additional illumination may be helpful on this point.

Positive Mimesis

The grace of God has provided humankind with models of how to resist negative mimetic desire and foster positive mimetic desire (Augustine, 2003). In the Old Testament, for example, God presents the law, including the Ten Commandments (Ex 20: 1-17). The Ten Commandments directly relate to mimetic desire. The first set of the commandments prohibits negative mimetic desire as it relates to the position of God. The second set prohibits the interpersonal ramifications of mimetic desire. The Ten Commandments clearly recognize the role of mimetic desire in sin. God also provided individu-

als, such as the prophets, who represented the image and likeness of God in an especially illuminating and accurate way (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007).

However, individuals were not provided with the ability to live the law. In the New Testament, additional instructions were given for positive mimetic desire along with more examples, such as the apostles. The culmination of these is the image and likeness of God appearing in Christ Jesus (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). Unlike Adam, Jesus did not give in to the temptation to become competitive with God. Instead, He exemplified a relationship with a true, non-counterfeit image of God. In His life and teaching, Jesus communicated the true, unaltered image of God as the loving and merciful Father, whose unconditional forgiveness is offered. Consequently, “before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So, the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:23-24). The law was not able to overcome mimetic desire but instead provided opportunity for sin, in the form of mimetic desire to flourish. Jesus intervened to release humankind from the bondage of negative desire.

The New Testament also provides an illustration of the damaging effects of mimetic desire (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). Jesus is viewed as threatening to others, is accused of blasphemy, and is crucified in response. In this situation, Jesus denounces violence and offers his own life (John 10: 17, 18) and, in the process, takes on the role of scapegoat, providing forgiveness for human sin. In this way, Jesus provides an example of how to correctly focus mimetic desire; He imitates His heavenly Father, but He does so in a non-rivalrous fashion (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus says, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (John 5:19-20). The imitation of the Father by Jesus is not based on greed or on position. Instead, it is a depiction of the perfect love inherent within the Trinity. As Niewiadomski (2005) noted, Jesus “became independent of mimetic projections” because his “relation to his God had become the innermost core of his own self-experience and of his own person” (p. 495). Jesus presents the Father not as one who capriciously withholds good things from His creation but as a loving Father willing to share everything, including Himself.

In themselves, however, individuals are unable to see beyond the negative aspects of mimetic desire, the effect

of original sin (Augustine, 2003; Kaplan, 2016). The resurrection, however, changes this situation because, in the resurrection, Jesus breaks the power of mimetic desire. Further, similar to how the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at the time of His baptism, humans can experience the indwelling of the Spirit to experience positive mimesis (Ephesians 2:1-9). The Holy Spirit allows humans to see and understand the undistorted image of God and imitate it not as a rival based on competition or acquisition but as an imitation based on the experience of complete forgiveness—positive mimesis (Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). The change can best be regarded as salvation (Palaver, 2003), something that is not possible through one's own efforts but is only possible through an external gift of Grace (Augustine, 2010; Girard, 2001).

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4)

Thus, the power of the resurrection lies in freeing individuals from the power of negative mimetic desire. Individuals who have been freed are no longer bound to the negative competitive nature of mimetic desire. Smith (2009) raises the question, "So what would it take to resist the alluring formation of our desire—and hence, our identity—that is offered by the market and the mall?" (p. 24). The only answer is through personal transformation. The transformation through the Spirit transfigures individuals' relationships with God and permits the renewal of human relationships because relationships with others no longer need to be competitive. Instead, interpersonal relationships can now exhibit positive mimesis. Said differently, Spirit-transformed individuals are able to manifest the love of God to others and, instead of basing relationships on competition, they can base relationships on love and forgiveness (Augustine, 2010; Steinmair-Pösel, 2007). Consequently, believers are instructed to imitate Christ and those who represent Him in all ways (e.g., Ephesians 4:32, 5:2; 1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6). Likewise, Paul states, "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a

fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1-2), where "follow" means to imitate or mimic. As a result of the freedom of salvation, individuals are able to pass on what they have received to others. Indeed, transformation of desire is central to sanctification (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:22).

The difference between positive and negative mimesis, as it relates to interpersonal relationships, is illustrated in Mark. The other apostles are outraged by the request of the sons of Zebedee to sit beside Jesus on His throne (Mark 10:26-45), indicative of mimetic desire (the other apostles immediately desired the same privilege). Jesus responds that the model is different in the Kingdom. Instead of interpersonal competition and striving, He gives a model of service. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45). The term translated "ransom" is the Greek word *lutron*, whose root meaning is freeing or release. Among other things, this refers to the release from the effects of negative mimesis. This does not suggest, however, that individuals are released from the detrimental effect of sin, or mimetic desire, at salvation. For most, negative mimetic desire must still be actively fought.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. [c] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:15-25)

Jesus, therefore, has exposed mimetic desire, broken its power, and, through the Spirit, provides a means to overcome it. "To break the power of [violent] mimetic unanimity, we must postulate a power superior to violent

contagion. If we have learned one thing in this study, it is that none exists on earth” (Girard, 2001, p. 189).

APPLICATION TO CHRISTIAN MARKETING PRACTITIONERS

The previous discussion brings us back to the original question. What guidance does an understanding of mimetic desire provide for Christian marketing practitioners? Within consumer societies, it would appear that mimetic desire plays a significant role in human choice behavior. Indeed, in societies where basic survival needs are met, mimetic desire is the driver behind most demand in the marketplace (Belk et al., 2003). Although marketing practitioners may not be aware of the theory behind mimetic desire, the reality of its outcomes are widely entrenched in marketing thought and practice; the notion that individuals’ tastes are determined and directed by others is probably one of the most central marketing principles today (Burns, 2010). This reality is clearly portrayed in popular culture, appearing in myriads of popular songs and media representations but perhaps most clearly depicted in the film *The Jones* (2010) (Burns, 2018). This suggests that, within consumer culture, the key to success in the marketplace is to use mimetic desire to develop the trendiness or desirability of the product. This can be facilitated through the use of branding, advertising, spokespeople, internet influencers, etc. Consequently, when one views the marketplace today, it appears unlikely that a product can become a success without first building mimetic desire. Smith (2009) states,

I think we should first recognize and admit that the marketing industry – which promises an erotically charged transcendence through media that connects to our heart and imagination – is operating with a better, more creational, more incarnational, more holistic anthropology than much of the (evangelical) church. In other words, I think we must admit that the marketing industry is able to capture, form, and direct our desires precisely because it has rightly discerned that we are embodied, desiring creatures whose being-in-the-world is governed by the imagination. (p. 76)

Furthermore,

Advertising (a marketing tool) doesn’t try to demonstrate to you that the object it is selling is the best from an objective point of view. They’re always trying to prove to you that the object is desired and

possessed by the people that you would like to be. Therefore Coca-Cola is drunk on a very beautiful beach, in the marvelous sun, with a bunch of sun-tanned people who are always between the ages of 16 and 22, who are everything you would like to be, who obviously wear few clothes, but very expensive ones, because they have the most shapely bodies. Everything you might envy. (Girard et al., 2018)

The success of mimetic desire as a marketing tool is that it can lead individuals to increase their purchasing activity. Overlooking the obvious possible shortcomings of increased purchasing activity (e.g., debt, longer working hours), are there other possible shortcomings that must still be considered? Foremost is that objects of desire are necessarily unfulfilling; it is impossible to obtain the other’s being, to be like the other person (Harter, 2013). Consequently, desire becomes generative, where it seeks other objects onto which it can be directed (Tomelleri, 2015). The result is often an ongoing quest to acquire objects that cannot deliver, marking a life with failure and emptiness. In other words, mimetic desire can be a source of success for marketers, but at what cost? What is the responsibility of Christian marketers to the welfare of their customers?

Arguably, the ability to cater to and build mimetic desire is instrumental to success in marketing today. In today’s consumer culture, most purchases, be it a new automobile, a new article of clothing, home renovation, or even a small plant, are typically not driven by individuals’ needs but generally involve responding to a new trend or a redefinition of what is “fashionable”—desires prompted through mimesis (Burns, 2010). Even when the purchase is relatively mundane, such as a low-cost pen or a food item from the supermarket, mimesis plays a significant role. The design, color, and brand of the pen, for instance, are often driven by mimesis; most consumers will purchase a low-cost pen that is viewed as trendy and fashionable by others. Likewise, the food industry is driven by trendy products, even in basic product categories, such as raw produce. Indeed, even the concept of “what is healthy” is redefined daily. Berger (2010) states, “[T]he infinite extension of desire is one of the pre-conditions for consumer culture to work effectively” (p. 100). Referring to marketing, Smith (2009) states, “[H]ere is an industry that thrives on desire and knows how to get it” (p. 76).

Through mimetic desire, “marketing taps into our erotic religious nature and seeks to shape us in such a way that this passion and desire is directed to strange gods, alternative worship, and another kingdom,” (Smith,

2009, p. 76). Given such a marketplace driven by mimetic desire, what is the position to be taken by Christian marketing practitioners? This question cannot be easily answered. To succeed in the marketplace, one generally must establish a product as the new trendy option that will attract mimetic desire. Indeed, the goal of many advertisements and other marketing communications is to elicit mimetic demand. Hence, the role of mimetic desire in marketing success is unquestionable, driving a never-ending stream of purchases (Tomelleri, 2015). Consequently, demand in the marketplace continues and escalates, providing an ongoing market for products (Palaver, 2013).

The authors have observed that research on the discipline of marketing from a Christian perspective often takes one of two forms. Research by marketers using the first form often examines biblical examples to build justifications for many popular marketing practices. With the exception of practices viewed to be clearly illegal or immoral (e.g., cheating customers, presenting false information) or involving products viewed to be illegal or immoral (e.g., illicit drugs), attempts are made to find “Christian” foundations of marketing. From this perspective, marketing is ordinarily viewed positively as having a role in meeting individuals’ needs by equating meeting individuals’ needs with a servant attitude (Parks, 2016). This viewpoint tends to not make a distinction between needs and desire, viewing the satisfaction of both as a goal of marketing, overlooking the potential issues with appealing to desire as discussed in this paper. Other research on marketing from a Christian perspective, often that originating from researchers in the arts and sciences disciplines, takes a very different approach, often taking a very negative perspective toward marketing (e.g., Michel et al., 2019; Nemko 2017) .

The discussion presented in this paper, however, is from a marketing point of view while taking a critical perspective. The discussion suggests that if desire, as it is manifest in the marketplace, is mimetic (which has direct ties to original sin), it is no small matter. If, as this paper suggests, most choices made by consumers are driven by mimetic desire, mimetic desire may be the primary, and for many product categories, the only driver of product success. Without understanding this reality, well-intentioned Christians could find themselves building and furthering mimetic demand and, in essence, furthering potentially sinful mindsets and activities. Marketing has been successful beyond expectations in raising individuals’ standards of living, but at what cost? This discussion seems to suggest two conclusions.

First, building and appealing to mimetic desire does not appear to be an appropriate course of action for Christian marketing practitioners to foster interpersonal competition to one’s or one’s company’s advantage by employing the strategies used by the serpent. The Bible clearly displays the undesirability of leading others into sin (Matthew 18:6). Does this not apply to a business context? Is it acceptable to promote sinful mindsets and activities of individuals even if businesses directly profit from it? This approach does not appear to be a viable approach for Christian marketers.

Second, Christian marketers need to take the time and effort necessary to explore the foundations of their discipline. It appears that some of the assumptions and foundations of the discipline and some its practices may warrant attention.

Christian Perspectives on Marketing

What is the current approach taken by Christian marketing practitioners? A quick online review of practitioners who claim to present a Christian approach to marketing seems to indicate that the issue of mimetic desire is not viewed as a problem. For example, Lovell (2013) focuses mostly on the development of strong brands, using narratives similar to how sermons, hymns, and the Psalms are “utilized.” In doing so, he is arguably advocating for the use of mimetic desire. Tsague (2010) recognizes that Christian marketers should not follow the sales approach used by the serpent in the garden but should use a “sowing and reaping” approach. The difference between these approaches consists of what one is sowing—whether it is based on deceiving or enticing consumers into purchasing products they do not need. Since most purchases made in consumer cultures are not needed, Tsague (2010) may or may not be helpful to the Christian marketer seeking answers. Squiric (n.d.) uses Exodus 3, where God spoke to Moses, as the example of marketing strategy to be followed (what Squiric (n.d.) calls “Marketing like God”). Ignoring any questions that may arise about depicting God’s interaction with Moses as an example of marketing, the approach seems to imply a power imbalance between marketers and consumers (such as existed between God and Moses) and seems to accept existing marketing strategy, except for rejecting the use of violence or risqué images to attract attention. Squiric (n.d.) appears not to acknowledge or address the effect of mimetic desire. Finally, Zaldivar (2017) recognizes that marketing is changing from a product to a customer orientation (interestingly, a change that has been recognized

within the discipline of marketing for at least the last half century) and stresses the need to be ethical and to focus on the customer. He provides, however, little recognition of the underlying concerns of marketing.

In summary, with the exception of the avoidance of a few overtly questionable practices, it appears that the marketing advice of “Christian” marketing services differs relatively little from the services/advice of secular marketers, with the exception of justifying present marketing practices by “finding them in the Bible.” Many would question whether the examples of God’s supposed use of marketing practices are appropriate or valid. How can God’s communications with His people be used to sell toothpaste? There appears to be little questioning of the moral assumptions behind the techniques proposed.

This brings us to the question Olson (2011) raises: “Can a Christian work in the marketing field?” Unlike the sources mentioned above, Olson is not trying to sell marketing services or advice but instead briefly examines whether Christians should be involved in the field of marketing. In doing so, he raises selected ethically questionable practices in marketing. Although he does not directly address mimetic desire, he seems to recognize its existence. He concludes, “I would like to suggest that marketing and advertising may be a field Christians should abandon IF [emphasis in the original] they cannot operate with total transparency and honesty in it. And I am doubtful that these days that’s possible.” This is an important issue since Wrenn et al. (2013) believe that transparency is the “overriding core scriptural construct that should guide Christian market exchanges” (p. 10). Although the conclusion presented is drastic, his rationale is one that seems to require further analysis. Fostering mimetic desire is generally not done within a transparent environment. However, if a marketer does attempt to foster mimetic desire in a transparent way, will the results be different? Will consumers still desire a specific product if they realize that their desire was developed mimetically by marketers? This is an area for future research. However, based on current research, it would appear likely that transparency would make little difference in consumers’ activities. If that is true, does that make appealing to mimetic desire acceptable? Wrenn et al. (2013) state that “marketers should not suggest that the consumption of material or physical goods or services can add meaning to life. It can’t” (p. 10). This is, however, precisely how mimetic desire operates.

CONCLUSION

The argument presented in this paper began as an extension of the discussion by Burns and Fawcett (2012) on the relationship between strong brands and idol worship. The intent was to begin an examination of a foundation of marketing, not just a single strategy, specifically by examining desire.

This examination supported the contentions made by Burns and Fawcett (2012) by showing that marketing strategies/tactics likely gain their power in the marketplace by mimetic desire, tying marketing strategies/tactics not only to idol worship but directly to original sin. This examination raises a number of critical questions for which there are no easy answers. It would appear, however, that explorations into these questions need to be a top priority of Christian marketing practitioners and Christian marketing faculty.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



David J. Burns, DBA, is chair and professor of the Department of Marketing and Professional Sales, Kennesaw State University. He has co-authored several books, published over 100 journal articles, several books, numerous book chapters and cases, and presented over 250 papers. His research interests include retail location and atmospherics, ethics, higher education, faith and mission integration, and consumer culture. His teaching interests include retailing and other consumer-based areas, including marketing and the consumer culture and neuro-marketing.



Yvonne Smith, PhD, is professor of management at the University of La Verne. Before becoming an academic, she was an entrepreneur and started several successful businesses. She has published over 90 journal articles and presented over 100 papers at peer-reviewed conferences. She served as editor of the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* from 2009-2015.