

Less is Less

Wal-Mart wants Nestle to slim down. Coca-Cola wants you to understand that less bottle does not mean less Coke. America's corporate kingdoms want their peasant purchasers to realize that packaging and content are not the same thing.

It has to do with global warming – and, of course, the bottom line. Groups like Environmental Defense and the Sustainable Packaging Coalition (no kidding) argue that more efficient containers mean less stuff in landfills, fewer clear-cut forests, and good things for the spotted owl. Corporate America responds that using less package to hold the same product means higher profits.

So Dasani water bottles now require seven percent less plastic due to a mutation in the shape of the cap. Nestle has saved twenty million pounds of paper by shrinking the size of its labels. Even Estee Lauder has resorted to recycled aluminum and paper for its glitzy gift boxes. Coke came out with a shorter, stumpier bottle.

Manufacturers worry that consumers may mistake a smaller container for reduced content but are willing to take the risk when Wal-Mart, which deals with 66,000 vendors, insists on being "packaging neutral" by 2025. And they can check their progress using a calculator that grades the bulk and recycling potential of bags, boxes, tubes and bottles.

If I'm hearing this right, America, Inc. is deploying its vast PR machine to convince us that substance trumps surface, that a stripped-down carton can maximize content, that it really is what's inside that counts.

Evangelicals in America decided some time back to take the opposite tack. We decided that our content – death to self through faith in a crucified Lord who called us to sacrifice and service – needed some seriously pimped-out packaging. We decked Jesus out in a t-shirt and jeans and reworked the Sermon on the Mount to a three-chord rock 'n' roll riff. Bonhoeffer wrote that , "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." We reworked this slogan to the catchier, "Jesus died to make you rich, slim, and sun-tanned." The gospel preached was not big enough to overcome the undersized preacher, so we blew him up on Jumbotron screens and miked him for thundering volume.

We might do well to take a lesson from Wal-Mart. Maybe if we invested less in our packages we would have more time, energy, and money to

recycle in the form of ministry. Maybe the unsaved are not so silly as we thought, and are really capable of seeing the big meaning in the small presentation. Who knows? Maybe the gospel really is true, the Holy Spirit actually present, and the Bible capable of doing its own work in the absence of a marketing plan.

Perhaps the time has come to pray with a poorly-packaged prophet who knew nothing of power-suits or good location: "He must increase, and my brand recognition must decrease."

Less Power To You,
Doug