

Bagged for Jesus: The economy of salvation

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 16, 2007](#) issue

"The economy of salvation" is an ancient phrase used by everyone from the Eastern Orthodox theologians of old to pioneer Pentecostal preacher Phoebe Palmer to thinkers across the Christian spectrum today. Technically, it refers to divine stewardship, God's "household management" (*oikonomia*), but also to elements of trade: God's gift, our response.

In our time not "the economy of salvation" but "the economy *and* salvation" is the hotter topic. Economists and prophets alike debate the place of riches and poverty, social engineering and radical choice, free markets and unfree markets in relation to religion.

Sometimes "the economy of salvation" is heard in discussions of the marketing of religions in a world of choice.

It's a world of too much choice, according to Swarthmore sociologist Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice*. Schwartz studies the psychology relating to choice, especially among shoppers. Too much choice in a society of the well-off, he says, has left many unhappy. The "fact that *some choice* is good doesn't necessarily mean that *more choice* is better. Too much choice can leave us shoppers with anxiety, stress, dissatisfaction—even clinical depression." Recently Schwartz has been examining how and why high-end merchants lure shoppers.

Take handbags. The merchant displays and advertises outrageously expensive items, appealing to the impulse of people to be up there with the elite. Shoppers come into the store, know they can't buy the top item, but don't want to leave without something that conveys a sense of prestige. So they buy something else, still at an outrageous price, but less outrageous than other handbags.

More familiar is the age-old approach in which a firm advertises ridiculously low prices as a lure, attracts shoppers, and then is sold out, or displays the low-priced

item next to higher-priced ones which the shopper cannot easily turn down.

Everyone knows that the public goes church shopping today. The church marketers' job is to lure seekers and shoppers onto the premises, hoping and half-expecting that once they're there they'll become permanent customers. Many of the books on church growth offer one of two competing strategies.

The first offers an economy of salvation on the cheap. Minimize any call to discipleship, let people know that "all are welcome"; "come as you are" implies that there will never be demands. The prosperity gospel is in this camp. Yes, there are some prices: church members have to give generously. But in this economy God promises commensurate rewards. At other churches maybe in November, "Stewardship Month" (aka budget-setting time), there will be an appeal, but after that those who were attracted are home free.

The second offers an economy of salvation that is expensive. There is more biblical warrant if less marketing finesse in this approach. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it *The Cost of Discipleship*, picking up on Jesus' stories that command, for the sake of the kingdom, that we sell all that we have and give to the poor.

WWJD? What would Jesus do? Jesus leaves his disciples with the paradox of choice, one that will not help shoppers for that expensive or lower-priced handbag. "Do not acquire . . . a bag for your journey" (Matt. 10:9-10) versus "But now, let him who has a purse take it along, likewise also a bag" (Luke 22:36). Evidently it all depends on the "who" and "when" and "where" of decisions and possessions. The economy of salvation must leave room for both high-end and "y'all come" approaches. Call it situation ethics in church advertising and policy.