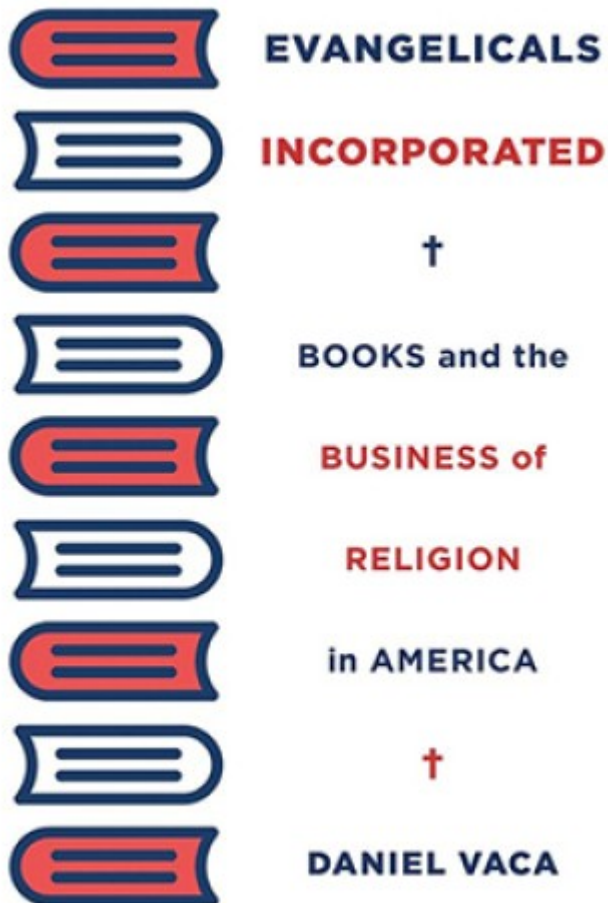


The big business of evangelical Christian publishing

Daniel Vaca details the marriage of missionary zeal and financial reward.

by [Grant Wacker](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Evangelicals Incorporated

Books and the Business of Religion in America

By Daniel Vaca
Harvard University Press

Several years ago, an elderly friend of mine died and I ventured into a local Logos Bookstore in search of a sympathy card. When I asked the young clerk at the front desk where I might find one, she inquired, “Was your friend Christian or non-Christian?” My instinct was to respond, “Are there any other options?” I held my tongue, but I have long remembered the incident as a testament to evangelicals’ earnestness and entrepreneurial skill.

Daniel Vaca, who teaches American religious history and culture at Brown University, puts this incident in a larger perspective. With expert strokes, he traces the history of the marriage of missionary zeal and financial reward that drove the evangelical publishing megabusiness.

And megabusiness it was. Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*, released in 2002, sold 30 million copies in the United States alone within three years, making it the best-selling hardback ever. The New International Version of the Bible, translated with evangelical assumptions in mind, presold 1.2 million copies before it appeared in 1978. Within a decade, its sales had soared to 100 million copies, making it the best-selling Bible translation ever. And the list goes on.

The story Vaca tells is long. His narrative starts with the invention of the printing press in Germany in the 15th century, and it gains steam in the United States in the early 19th century with the formation of evangelical benevolent societies. Many of these endeavors sought to distribute printed materials that heralded their causes as widely as possible.

The late 19th century saw the emergence of organizations better viewed as businesses, most notably Arthur Fitt’s Bible Institute Colportage Association and the company that Fleming H. Revell named after himself. In the 1930s, William B. Eerdmans and his nephew, Peter “Pat” Zondervan, both in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and both of Dutch Reformed persuasion, founded firms of their own. The evangelical publishing market eventually found space for additional companies such as Baker Publishing Group, InterVarsity Press, Moody Publishers, Thomas Nelson, and Tyndale House.

The marriage of missionary zeal and financial reward took time to mature. The early benevolent societies had dispersed their products for a nominal price when possible

but for free when necessary. Revell, in contrast, saw how to make the enterprise pay, partly by capitalizing on technological advances and partly by allying himself with his brother-in-law Dwight L. Moody, who embraced a pan-evangelical appeal.

Money talked. For many years the relationship between the Eerdmans and Zondervan publishing empires remained testy, not least because of tensions over fair competition. Eerdmans eventually carved out its own niche, focusing on works of serious theology, history, and biblical studies, while Zondervan moved into the much larger and more lucrative market of popular devotional books. With that strategic decision, Zondervan hit the motherlode.

The great irony here is that evangelical editors routinely denied that profit motives were central. If God blessed their endeavors with eye-popping sales and generous margins, so much the better. But in their minds, mission—not profit—governed the enterprise.

Vaca does not deny that evangelical literature might well have nurtured enduring needs of the spirit, and he does not impugn editors' integrity. But he makes clear that their relentless focus on the bottom line—and the shrewdness of the tactics they deployed—shows that the picture was more complicated than they allowed.

In Vaca's mind, the word *evangelical* needs reconsideration. He dismisses the customary definition of evangelicalism as a religious tradition defined by a handful of key doctrines. Instead, he argues, it is better understood as an amorphous social movement with pious sensibilities. To be sure, it centered on Christians who considered themselves born again. But like ripples flowing out from a pebble tossed into a pond, this center quickly dissolved into a constantly shifting array of norms, attitudes, and practices—and purchasing and reading habits.

Vaca argues that the market shaped the movement more than the reverse. Editors, more than theologians or denominational leaders, guided its tastes and policed its boundaries. Entrepreneurs at heart, they proved endlessly adaptable and remarkably resourceful. They capitalized—in both senses of the word—on larger trends in society and the economy. Over the years, evangelical booksellers, like grocers, transformed themselves from mom-and-pop merchants into managers of classy stores in suburban malls with wide aisles, soft music, and well-trained staff members. They increasingly catered to female consumers—especially homemakers—and children.

Middle-class white people not only bought most of the books but also formed the target audience. With important exceptions, especially in the Spanish-language book trade, normative whiteness served as evangelical publishers' "default identity." That identity ran so deep that it functioned more as a presupposition than as a publicly stated business principle. This elision doesn't get them off the hook. By many measures, implicit racism is worse than the explicit form—precisely because it is harder to identify and, when identified, easier to deny.

A book so boldly written naturally invites several reservations. The main theme of the marriage of economic interest and evangelical conviction could do with fewer repetitions. So could Vaca's claim that the evangelical book market not only targeted a white middle-class constituency but also reinforced structures of white racism and power. And I am not convinced that evangelicals constituted themselves mainly by market forces rather than doctrinal convictions. Average patrons of their bookstores might have been fuzzy on the nuances of supralapsarianism, but they knew they weren't Christian Scientists or Buddhists.

Still, viewed whole, the book is a brilliant achievement. The prose is consistently lucid and mercifully free of jargon. The research is impeccable, seamlessly incorporating primary documents, secondary monographs, and personal interviews. Vaca draws on a recent surge of first-rate historical studies of the relation between economic forces and evangelical formation, including Darren Dochuk on petroleum, Bethany Moreton on Walmart, and Brendan Pietsch on quantification. Vaca expands the scope of those studies by shining a powerful light on a sprawling and, until now, barely explored topic.

The most influential evangelist of the 20th century, Billy Graham, often said that he launched his storied career not as a preacher but as a door-to-door Fuller Brush salesman in South Carolina back when he was a teenager. If you've got the best product in the world, he trumpeted, why not market it with all the skill and energy you've got? If Graham made the concept of entrepreneurial evangelicalism common currency, Vaca shows how Graham's editor friends paved the way—and made themselves so valuable that no one thought to ask for a refund.