

Theology

IN DISGUISE

“Help believers grasp theological concepts,” exhorts Steven Dixon, director of Editions Farel in France.

There is a great demand for theological books. As soon as they hit bookstore shelves, they usually sell out with very little marketing effort needed.

In addition, they are relatively cheap to translate, the editors can squeeze a lot of text onto each page, and high print runs significantly lower the unit cost of each title making theological books a high profit-margin item.

Such a situation is a publisher's dream. Unfortunately, the exact opposite best describes the situation for theological books in the French language. How can this be in a country known worldwide for its high intellectual activity?

Ah, France! The land of Calvin, Descartes, Pascal or Voltaire to name but a few, does indeed have a rich cultural, intellectual and theological heritage. Unfortunately, the works of past and present thinkers rarely benefit the average person. The French educational system remains somewhat elitist to this day. What emanates from academia is looked upon with awe by the average person on the street. It carries a certain aura. The more obscure and incomprehensible it is, the more it is revered.

Unlike the members of so-called intellectual circles, the vast majority of the population feels no need to pretend to understand such high philosophy. Thus, few people are truly impacted by great French thinkers. Instead, most must rely on the media to digest lofty ideas. Too often, however, for the popular

media the only worthwhile idea is an idea that sells.

What does all of this have to do with marketing theological titles in France?

Direct marketing works best

As one might expect, the situation within the evangelical church in France is similar to that of the culture at large. Label a book “theological” and the average churchgoer is sure to pass it by. At best, they might hope their pastor will read it, select a few brief passages, and preach on them Sunday morning. Maybe then they will hear the answers they need spoken in simple words they can understand and remember. Fortunately, pastors make a greater effort to select worthwhile ideas in this popularization routine.

Given these constraints, the best route to selling theological books in France is to target the pastors and church leaders. This is the way that Christian publishers most effectively minister to the church in France, and a number of publishers do this quite well. Christian workers do not represent a huge crowd in a country where only one half of one percent of the population belongs to evangelical churches.

In France it is quite simple to get a hold of a few evangelical directories, copy down several thousand addresses of Christian workers and start mailing ads to pastors. If the title is focused enough and the publishing house does its marketing well, it can usually end up with a

good share of that small market. It is reasonable to expect to sell a small print run and make a slight profit, even when specialty titles carry a higher than average price.

In this situation, the hardest part is standing out from the crowd. Publishers are not the only ones communicating with pastors. One's strategy needs to be well thought out. Initially a huge effort will have to go into forging a positive image in the minds of pastors so they will pause and select one's piece of mail out of the dozen weekly brochures they receive.

Other segments of the market

Theological books are sold in other French-speaking countries, but they only add a small contribution to the global French market. (African French-speaking countries have many more evangelical Christians than Europe, but there are enormous financial and structural hurdles in getting books to them.)

In France, one long-standing but elusive dream has been that of selling to the old mainline protestant denominations, or better still, through the much wider Catholic distribution channels. Evangelical publishers have yet to figure out how to do this to any extent. There tends to be a huge gap in France between the culture of the younger evangelical churches and that of the more established denominations. The ensuing filtering effect works both ways, and change in this area does not seem too likely very soon.

Aiming for a bigger market

Part of the difficulty in selling theological titles is linked to the unique French situation, yet one can find a similar situation in most any country. With so much importance placed on correct doctrine, with wars waged over the smallest variations in beliefs, with Christian maturity often linked to the level of education one has received from long, hard and costly seminary studies, theology can be a little intimidating to average Christians. This is especially true if they do not realize, as they are rarely told, that they are already theologians every day, whether they like it or not.

The “aim at the pastors” approach to theological book marketing works in France. Should publishers stick to this trickle-down system? Is it satisfactory? Would it not be better to convince churchgoers that theology does not have to be complex and obscure, and that it is relevant to their daily lives and concerns?

To meet this challenge, Farel is offering “theology in disguise.” Its titles are not packaged in drab colors. They are written in a style not usually found in theological books. Sometimes this approach actually works.

A 300-page book on ecclesiology was one of Farel’s top ten selling titles last year. The idea for the book came from a respected French author and conference speaker. He travels extensively and sees many congregations up close, with their joys, their needs and their problems. His teaching is right at the level of his audience.

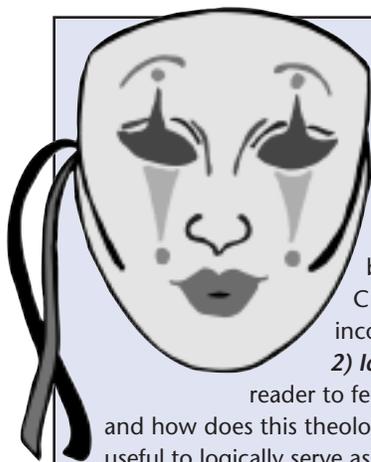
His choice of disguise was to present the material in epistolary form. A series of fictional church members directly or indirectly face serious issues in some very dysfunctional congregations. They write to the author about their problems, and he responds with insightful comments, clarifying issues and developing a practical everyday ecclesiology.

Rather than naming the book *Letters on the Theology of the Church*, the author suggested *Letters to Wounded Christians (and to their Leaders)*. Not only has this book sold faster than any theological work Farel has published in recent times, but it has prompted an unusual level of response from readers who can identify with the problems described. It is right on target in a context where little thinking has traditionally gone into issues of church life. This is an area that is naturally difficult for pastors to address from the pulpit because a pastor’s identity is often tied to the life of the congregation.

Ironically the danger for Farel with the practice of publishing theological books “in disguise” is that it may risk losing its sales among pastors on such titles! It takes agile communication to help pastors realize these books are actually great tools for ministry. Pastors can recommend them to churchgoers who would not think of consulting Calvin’s *Institutes*, but who still need solid theology for daily life. Since pastors can feel overwhelmed by the task of transmitting theology in bite-size pieces, Farel’s books are extremely convenient.

This double marketing, that is disguising theology while convincing pastors that the books offer accessible but solid theology, requires a lot of effort and time. It means selecting specific messages for specific channels within Farel’s limited means.

Theology in disguise is by no means a new or original concept. Many have been masters at this art: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis or more recently Philip Yancey, to name a few who write in English. With the current enthusiasm for reaching the post-modern generation, a lot of thinking is going into how to do theology differently. With ever more creative stealth works, Farel can make good, accessible theological resources more widely available. ♦



DISGUIISING THEOLOGICAL BOOKS

1) Win authors over to the positive aspects of this approach. Christian authors naturally want to serve readers, but they also desire to write what will be respected by their peers. Show authors that theological books in disguise are a tremendous service to the Church. Also, they are more likely to be a better source of income than slow-selling highly-respected academic titles.

2) Identify a point of entry. What will it take for your average reader to feel personally concerned about the issue at hand? Where and how does this theological subject touch upon that person’s life? Is that point useful to logically serve as the basis for a theological investigation of the topic?

3) Survey theological books in your market and produce something very different. Choose a title that presents the point of entry rather than the theological topic. Type-set the interior text so that it is airy, clearly laid out, simple to follow and easy to read for people who do not have higher education. Design a cover that will speak to thirsts of the readers. Do not rely on large type on a single-color background.

4) Market your title as a thirst-quencher. Do not herald your book as the definitive work on a complex theological issue. Show people how their lives can be enriched by the book, that it will touch their hearts and is relevant to their everyday lives.

5) Be passionate about what you do and have fun in the process. Few people are led to deep change through straight-to-the-point head knowledge. What transforms people is what touches the heart. Spirit-led passion is a great source of inspiration for discovering those “entry points” you need. The fun comes from the pleasure of using your creativity in the work to which God has called you.

—Steven Dixon