

IN THE MARGINS: The dogs don't like it

By Tony Martin

Editor

Hey, y'all! I want to share a story that's been on my mind lately. It's about a pet food company that was in trouble. Their sales had tanked, so the CEO called an urgent meeting with his top executive team. Picture this: everyone gathered around a massive conference table, the atmosphere thick with tension. The CEO started his speech:

"I don't get it," he said, shaking his head. "We have the best quality product on the market. It's nutritionally balanced. We've invested in the best packaging and hired a top-notch sales force. We're constantly innovating, and our marketing efforts are second to none. So, someone tell me, why isn't our dog food selling like it should?"

Silence. No one dared make eye contact. Finally, a new hire broke the silence. He hesitated, then quietly said, "Sir... the dogs don't like it."

Ouch. Simple, but profound, isn't it? Now, let's switch gears a bit: what if the same thing is happening with the Church today?

A Lost Connection

There's been a lot of hand-wringing lately about declining church attendance, especially in the West. Analysts and pundits are quick to proclaim the "death of Christianity." But I wonder if the real issue isn't that people have stopped caring about spiritual matters, but rather, they just don't like the "dog food" we're offering.

Now, hear me out. Churches today seem to be caught in a frantic race to stay relevant. We've got state-of-the-art lights, rock band worship, sermon series that feel more like TED Talks, and activities galore. But are we just chasing the wind? It's like we're desperately trying to market Jesus in the most palatable way possible. But what if the people walking through our doors aren't looking for entertainment? What if they're just looking for the real thing?

I'm not suggesting we become irrelevant because we're trapped in the past and don't communicate in a way that resonates with people today. Rather, we present the gospel as *always* relevant, and we present so unchurched people can connect. Like the old preacher said, "You gotta put the hay where the sheep can get to it."

What People are Truly Seeking

Let's be honest: a lot of churches today are like that pet food company – pouring resources into making everything look good on the outside while missing the heart of the matter. People are hungry, not for a show, but for substance. They want truth that cuts through the noise, a faith that stands firm in a world that feels like it's shaking apart.

Scripture puts it this way: *"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions"* (2 Timothy 4:3, ESV). Are we as church leaders and congregations guilty of catering to those itching ears? Have we replaced the life-changing message of the Gospel with feel-good platitudes to keep people comfortable?

I'm not advocating for a return to stiff, joyless gatherings. But I am suggesting that maybe what people are craving isn't more of the same "cool church" experience. Instead, they're looking for something real – something that challenges them, convicts them, and ultimately changes them.

A Wake-Up Call from a 7th Grader

Years ago, when I was serving as a youth pastor, I learned this the hard way. I spent the entire afternoon planning the perfect crowd-breakers for our Wednesday night youth group meeting. The kids arrived, and while some were mildly engaged, others were rolling their eyes. Eventually, one 7th grade boy – a kid who was far from a spiritual giant – raised his hand and said, “Tony, can we get through with these lame games and get on to something good?”

That one sentence stopped me in my tracks. I had been so focused on keeping their attention that I lost sight of what they were actually there for. They weren't looking for entertainment. They were searching for something real, something meaningful.

Listening to the “Dogs”

The lesson here? Listen to the people. Or in the analogy of our pet food story, listen to the “dogs.” If people aren't showing up, maybe it's because we're offering them something they don't really want or need.

Here are a few action points that church leaders might consider:

1. **Get Back to Basics:** Focus on biblical teaching and authentic worship. The early church didn't grow because it had the best PowerPoint presentations or coffee bars. It grew because the Holy Spirit was moving powerfully, and the message of Jesus was front and center. Acts 2:42 says, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”*
2. **Embrace Authenticity:** Stop trying to impress people with how cool your church is. Instead, be real about the struggles, challenges, and triumphs of living a life of

- faith. People are drawn to authenticity, not perfection.
3. **Prioritize Community:** Instead of flashy programs, invest in building real relationships. Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages us to *“consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.”*
 4. **Challenge and Convict:** Don't be afraid to preach the tough parts of the Bible. People aren't looking for another self-help talk; they're looking for the transformative power of the Gospel. Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).*
 5. **Create Space for Encounter:** Church shouldn't just be a place for social gatherings. It should be a place where people encounter God. That means making room for prayer, quiet reflection, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Bottom Line

Let's stop trying to be so palatable that we forget our true calling. The church wasn't meant to be a product to market; it's a community of believers living out a radical faith that transforms lives. If we get back to that, maybe we'll find that people – the real ones out there searching for meaning – will start showing up again.

Sometimes, the solution isn't about doing more. It's about doing less – but doing it with purpose, conviction, and a heart that's fully aligned with God's.

So, let's listen to the dogs, y'all. And maybe, just maybe, we'll see the church come alive in ways we haven't seen in years.