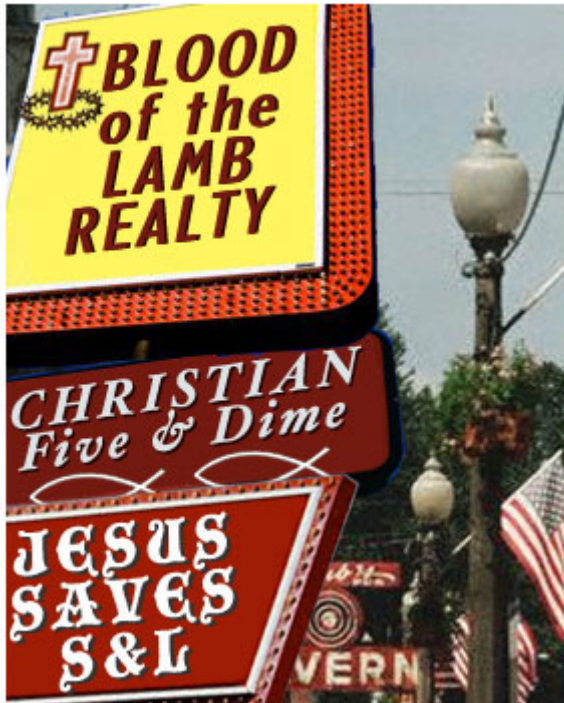


Verily, I sell unto you

Increasing numbers of evangelical business owners are hanging out their shingles with the word "Christian" prominently displayed. Are they bringing godliness to Main Street - or making hay on holiness?

By Lynn Harris



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School: The name might sound a bit dissonant to those who presume a certain separation of church and interstate. For the school's founder, however, the holy-meets-earthly title was a natural, even necessary choice. Mark Gadow, 40, has been a devout born-again Christian since the day that prayer alone, he says, healed his nearly debilitating joint pain. After 16 years in law enforcement, he was "called" to do something different, he says, and the school, based in Caroline County, Md., was born.

He does not "witness" about his faith until the last session of the program, but he does preach the "moral values" of "courtesy and consideration to other drivers," he says. "By the end of the course the students seem to think that they can call and talk to me as a friend or a mentor, or ask me to pray with them." Gadow recalls that the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration recommended against using "Christian" in the name of the school, suggesting that it might narrow his market. But he persisted, and now, four years later, he's turning students away.

Gadow is just one of an apparently growing number of small- and medium-sized-business owners who are proudly hanging out their shingles with the word "Christian" -- or at least with a telltale symbolic dove, fish or Bible verse -- prominently displayed. There are now

Christian [real estate agencies](#), [cellular](#) and [long-distance](#) services, [financial planners](#), [computer repair guys](#), [furniture stores](#), [bed-and-breakfast associations](#), [diets](#), [yoga](#) and [karate](#) instructors, and [goat breeders](#). These companies -- in contrast to religious bookstores, for example -- do earthly things in, they say, a Christian way.

Unlike [Curves](#), [Domino's](#) or [Coors](#), for example, which have been criticized for tithing their earnings to archconservative causes -- and unlike the Chick-fil-A fast-food chain, [closed on Sundays](#) because of its founder's religious beliefs -- these Christian companies link their work directly and overtly to their missions. ("Christian," in these cases, is generally taken to mean "born again," in which the business owner has a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ" that guarantees eternal life, and the responsibility to offer others the same opportunity.) The [mission statement](#) of Houston-based auto-repair franchiser Christian Brothers Automotive ("Christian" as in Christian, not a surname), for instance, reads: "To glorify God by providing ethical and excellent automotive repair service for our customers, according to Colossians 3:17, 'And whatever you do in word and deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.'"

Such enterprises are "a byproduct of multiculturalism," says Alan Wolfe, author of "The Transformation of American Religion" and director of Boston College's [Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life](#), noting that identity politics are not the exclusive domain of the secular left. "You identify who you are, take pride in your subgroup. It's no different in that sense from a business that caters to African-Americans or Hispanics. It's part of the general trend of segmentation in American life."

No statistics yet exist on the number or growth of these businesses, but there are certainly enough to support numerous [regional](#) and national Christian business directories. The largest such directory, the [Shepherd's Guide](#), now covers over 100 cities (after launching with just Baltimore, Md., in 1979). "There seems to be more of a recognized movement of Christian businesses in the marketplace," confirms David Moyer, Shepherd's Guide vice president. "In years past you didn't so much make a statement of your religious life through your business. Today Christians -- and I believe rightfully so -- are making a commitment to say, 'I want to stand out for my belief.'" (According to Christian retail trade association [CBA International](#), sales of specifically Christian products reached \$4.34 billion in 2004, up by about 10 percent from 2000). The [Christian Blue Pages](#) has tripled the number of regions it serves; Chris Chandler, founder of the online business directory [Christian eBuy.com](#), says that four years ago, he received one or two listing submissions a day. Now he gets 200. Why the increase? "Now people are seeing that they can be more open with their faith in the marketplace and the workplace. They're more emboldened," says Chandler. "I also think a lot of people feel that we're in the last days, and we've really got to share our faith."

The *last* days? One might have assumed that for evangelicals, these were the glory days. In fact, just as Chandler suggests, what's behind this surge in "Christian" businesses seems to be a little of both.

Mark Justad, executive director of the [Center for the Study of Religion and Culture](#) at Vanderbilt University, attributes the growing visibility of "Christian" businesses to, on the one hand, "an increasing public awareness of Christianity and people's comfort with identifying themselves as Christian." "Comfort" seems to be a gentle way to put it, though. "There's been a concerted assault on this thing called 'the separation of church and state,' and the boundaries of where religion can and should be expressed are shifting," he continues, noting that the explicit "Christianity" of particular businesses is related to the increasing acceptance of [religious expression in secular workplaces](#) in general. "There's an aggressive assertiveness on the part of one aspect of the Christian church, charging that this is a Christian nation, our roots are Christian, and we shouldn't have to pretend that we're not. They see it as 'pretending that they're not' if they're not bringing their whole lives into the mix. I'm sympathetic to that, but it does beg the question of how to live in a pluralistic society with many viewpoints, which is also part of the American tradition."

On the other hand, the act of identifying a business as explicitly Christian is "part of the ongoing culture wars, a statement that the culture still isn't Christian *enough*," says Justad. "You could see calling a business 'Christian' as an act of faith and an act of defiance at the same time."

Cynical readers may at this point be thinking, Faith, schmaith: Couldn't calling yourself "Christian" be nothing more than an act of savvy marketing?

Well, yes and no. Some so-called Christian businesses -- such as debt consolidators -- are guilty at least of the sin of spamming, and possibly of much worse. Debt Relievers Inc., for one, which also used the name Christian Debt Management, is currently under investigation for [fraud](#) by the [Office of the Attorney General of Florida](#).

But many business owners express sincere horror at the notion of using the Lord's name purely for gain. "Heck, no!" exclaims Mark Carr, founder of Christian Brothers Automotive, when asked if his company's name could be considered a marketing ploy. "One of the guys in church criticized me for that, and I got down on my knees and said, 'Lord, I would never use your name to capitalize on it.' I get a few snide e-mails about it, but I have to blow them off because that stuff is nonsense. I'm proud to have that name on my building, man. It's not for marketing purposes, because that turns my stomach."

Others say that using the word "Christian" isn't so great for business to begin with. "If I was going to come up with a gimmick, I would come up with a better gimmick than that!" insists Irene Trammell, founder of [This Is IT! Christian Fitness ... for Ladies](#) in Pasadena, Md. (The "IT" represents her initials.) "I have made my market *smaller* by putting that sign up there." Trammell, who used to go in person to sell vitamins and nutritional supplements to area gyms, developed a distaste for the lyrics of the workout music and the fact that the women who were exercising could be seen from the street; one day she got into her car and heard a "still, small voice" -- a reference to the way God speaks to Elijah in 1 Kings -- suggesting that she start her own gym. "We have three big window shades in front, but I can hear through them what people are saying on the

sidewalk: "They're Christian? I'm not going in there!" says Trammel. "It's actually unfortunate; this world is wicked and the name of the Lord sometimes repels people."

Perhaps even fellow Christians, suggests Justad. "Christianity is very diverse, and there are a lot of people -- Christians -- who I know would feel that putting a 'Christian' sticker on one's business lacks humility," he says. Scripture itself, after all, warns against flaunting one's own righteousness.

"There's a difference between Christianity in your heart and Christianity in your face," says James Twitchell, author of "Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld" and professor of English and advertising at the University of Florida at Gainesville.

But for many Christian business owners, it's *not* proclaiming their faith that would be insincere. The more liberally, or less devoutly, religious might see their lives divided into overlapping circles such as "personal," "professional" and "spiritual." But for an evangelical Christian, there is generally no clear line between "work" and "religion," no hard distinction between Monday through Friday and Sunday. "Jesus has placed on the hearts of Christians that they should get out there and let others know: 'I am God and I am going to be present in all aspects of people's lives, not just at church but seven days a week,'" says Trammell.

Thus, for many born-again Christians, every action -- from prayer to wheel alignment -- is an opportunity to glorify God, perhaps even spread the Gospel. "I got saved at an Amway meeting, so the marketplace is where I invite Christ into my life," says Chuck Ripka, 46, co-founder of Riverview Community Bank in Otsego, Minn. ("We invited Jesus to be the CEO of our bank," he says, attributing the bank's "supernatural" growth -- from \$5.5 million in start-up capital to \$103 million in 27 months -- to divine intervention.) While the bank's name may sound generic (and the company [Web site](#) is "God"-free), the Ten Commandments banner in the foyer, the "God Bless You" sign at the tellers station, and the painting in the CEO's office of two businessmen shaking hands with Jesus, might tip customers off. "God has allowed us to be who we are: We're Christians and we're bankers, and we're allowed to mix the two. To me, it's seamless. We're a bank first, but in the midst of it all, when customers express their own needs, I am able to pray along with them," says Ripka, who customarily asks God's blessing for reporters at the end of interviews.

For those who patronize certain businesses *because* they label themselves as Christian, that's affinity marketing at work: It's like going to the plumber you know from Bible study -- only now the plumber's advertising as such. "This is hardly new," says Twitchell. Back in the day, he says, "you went to church, you looked around, you saw a lawyer or a doctor who was part of the community, and you wanted to deal with them because they're familiar and you're going to see them on Sunday." The difference is that now, in the megachurches that dominate the evangelical landscape -- and often attract transient populations -- you often don't know your neighbor, he says. The result: Christian businesses need to make themselves known as such. One could say the same not just of

megachurches but of the exurbs in general, many of which may have lost their everyone-knows-everyone town center to a local [Wal-Mart](#). Some companies, in fact, such as the [Christian Real Estate Network](#) -- which pledges "to represent our clients as Christ would have us do, and to approach each transaction with a servant heart" -- have sprung up precisely to match up relocating Christians with Christian loan officers or real estate agents. The network has 360 agents in 48 states who are familiar with area churches and Christian schools.

To the jaded homebuyer, "Christian real estate agent" -- much like "Christian auto mechanic" -- may sound like an oxymoron. That's also, of course, part of the point. The word "Christian" does seem to promise an exceedingly ethical, love-thy-customer, "How would Jesus sell?" approach to doing business, though Christian entrepreneurs themselves admit that it's no universal or automatic guarantee (two words: "Jim Bakker"). (They are also quick to add that they don't mean they *wouldn't* trust the local atheist electrician.)

According to gym owner Trammel, there's just one downside to this assumption of Christian kindness: Customers occasionally figure that "Christian" means "nice to a fault." Trammell has had to explain that, no, just because she's a Christian doesn't mean she's going to let you break your contract. "You shouldn't expect to be able to steamroll over the Christian business, but you should expect to be treated more than fairly," she says. "The ones that are tricking people, they'll be found out," she adds, chuckling. "After all, he's the one in charge of the lightning bolts."

Christian business owners also say their customers like to know where their money's going: not just to a Christian company but also, in many cases, to Christian causes. While companies such as Curves and Coors separate business and charity, Christian companies often explicitly support churches, missions or other religious charities. "Not that you're always going to be treated badly in the secular world, but people feel a little better going to a Christian business," says Christian eBay.com's Chandler. "They think, 'If I use a Christian Realtor, they're going to turn around and tithe our ministries, so ultimately this will benefit our cause.'" It's the same kind of thinking -- on the other end of the spectrum -- that sends people to [Working Assets](#) long distance for their blue-state-to-blue-state calling plans.

By the same token, the name "Christian" also suggests that a customer's money will not support causes that a Christian would not. Blessed Hope Communications, for one, markets itself precisely as an alternative to the mainstream long-distance carriers that -- according to its [Web site](#) -- support and encourage "sinful things." Blessed Hope alleges, footnotes and all, that AT&T, MCI and Sprint (the carrier for Working Assets) serve as carriers for "dial-a-porn" and contribute to organizations supporting abortion, "liberal causes and candidates," and "special rights for homosexuals." (AT&T declined to comment on the matter; MCI and Sprint did not respond to requests for comment.) Such charges -- as if to say, "You can't even pick up the *phone* without consorting with sinners!" -- play into, and play up, the sense that Christians are foundering in an

increasingly godless world. (They are not, however, all that different from the kinds of charges that would prompt, say, a Domino's boycott.)

Still, the crucial factor that separates explicitly Christian companies from others -- even from the niche or affinity marketing of an African-American caterer or a Hispanic legal practice -- is that some Christian business owners see their jobs as a legitimate, even necessary, means of proselytizing. "When someone asks, 'Who's your long-distance carrier?' it's a way for me to have a foot in the door to share the message of Christ," says Chandler, who also works as a sales agent for Blessed Hope Communications. Ripka of Riverview Community Bank says he has had 105 people "invite Christ into their lives" on bank premises. (He also claims over 70 faith healings.)

"There's been a big change in what 'witnessing' means," says Alan Wolfe of Boston College. "It used to mean overt actions to bring the message of Jesus to the nonsaved. Now it means more 'lifestyle evangelism.' You glow, and if someone asks you why you're so happy, you say, 'I found Jesus.' That's what's become more common. It's evidence that cold-calling, so to speak, doesn't work."

But aren't patrons of Christian businesses "saved" already? Not all of them. Some are Christians of other denominations who are not "born again"; others might be drawn by the business's reputation or something else that it offers (a women-only workout experience, say). "God leads them here," says Ripka. "A few have even said, 'This is really strange to say, but I felt drawn to your bank.'" A Christian-identified workplace -- helmed by someone with that "glow" -- actually offers the perfect opportunity for believers to encounter those who may be less devout but who still made it past the word "Christian" on the sign or the Ten Commandments at the door.

The majority of Trammell's customers are indeed saved. "They're Christian ladies, like pastors' wives, who can't walk into Bally's in a thong -- and who don't particularly want to walk in and see anyone else in a thong, either," she says. "But then, we've had 22 people saved here as well." Mostly, she subscribes to the notion of witnessing by example. "We should be patient with those that don't know him and go out of our way to be kind," she says. "Maybe someone will look back and say, 'Wow, I remember those Christian people -- they were kind of nice!'"

But when Trammell does feel "moved by the spirit," she will ask a customer if it would be OK for her to "share Jesus' plan of salvation," she says. "I could have opened up any gym and just decided to witness to people if I wanted to. But I don't want to be obnoxious about it. So I said, 'No, it's just gotta be *out there*.' This way I can say, 'You asked for it! You walked in.'"