

THE BUSINESS OF RELIGION

FAITH FOR SALE

Graig Silverman



The noon request hour at CHRI FM radio in Ottawa is the second shift of the day for Brock Tozer. Every weekday his alarm goes off at 4 a.m., then at 4:30 a.m. and again at 5 a.m. to ensure he is up and at the station for his 6 a.m. morning show. Tozer, a 27-year-old father of one, prefers to work standing up and is known around the station for broadcasting in his sock feet.

After his shift ends at 10 a.m., he comes back on air for the “By Invitation” request hour on the station, which is where he is now, giving a shoeless intro to Pillar’s cover of U2’s *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. The band Pillar is a mainstay on stations like CHRI, thanks to their heavy rock/hip hop sound, rugged good looks and proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ.

CHRI is a small, 66,000-watt Christian station tucked into two floors of a building in the Ottawa Business Park. When it launched on Easter Day in 1997, it was one of seven Christian radio stations in Canada. Today, it is among an estimated 30 full-time Christian stations, and one of 64 stations across the country that offer some form of Christian broadcasting. CHRI calls itself “The station that lifts you up by lifting Him up” and it is currently lobbying the CRTC to award it another station that will focus on religious teaching and hymns.

Just a 10-minute drive away from CHRI is one of the 23 Blessings Christian Marketplace stores in Canada where Christians can find books, music, jewellery, crafts, DVDs—just about any product one could possibly attach to the message of Jesus.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has drawn attention to the commercial power of the message of Jesus Christ, but the truth is that the film and its runaway success (\$370 million in box office in the U.S. and Canada as of August) is thanks to years of progress by Christian businesses and marketers. If Gibson had released his film about the crucifixion of Christ 10 or 15 years ago, there would have been very little expertise available to him in marketing the message to a North American market. Instead, it came at a time when there are national chains of Christian stores in Canada and the U.S., where Christian music labels are being bought by the majors and artists are crossing over into the mainstream, and Christian books are global best-sellers (though most best-seller lists tend to leave them off).

There are more stores, more albums, more books, more radio stations, more films, more of everything Christian being launched and consumed in Canada than ever before. An estimated 1.5 million Christian music CDs were sold in Canada last year, and the religious book *The Purpose-Driven Life* has sold 300,000 copies and counting in a country where sales of 5,000 are considered a bestseller. Christianity may lay claim to the best-selling book of all time, but it has been in a long commercial drought. Things, however, are changing.

Tozer has always loved Christian music, but he's the first to admit that it wasn't always easy to listen to. "A lot of Christian bands used to produce music that frankly sucked," he says. "If you compared it to secular music, you realized it was not good enough... they realized they had to make a good product."

This is one of the explanations offered to explain the rise in Christian retail: the products are better made. Ellen Graf, a marketing manager with the book division of R.G. Mitchell, a major Canadian retailer and distributor of Christian products, says the amount of product to choose from also keeps growing, and the marketing is more sophisticated. "We put together product and brand campaigns to draw people in," she says. "We purchase ad space in basically every Christian newspaper across Canada and partner with various radio stations to give great interviews. We also work with TV like *100 Huntley Street*. We do some secular media, but primarily we focus on Christian media."

"The wealth of product is unbelievable," says Stuart Cameron, who works in sales and marketing for Blessings Christian Marketplace, the largest chain of Christian stores in Canada. "We have a buying team that sorts through the thousands of items that are available. We have a gift buyer, bible buyer, music buyer."

The retailers and distributors all agree that there are more products and more customers eager to buy than ever before. But it can't be easy to sell Jesus in a country where the latest census figures show that fewer Canadians are identifying themselves with any of the major religions. Sixteen per cent say they have no religion and the number of Protestants has dropped by 35 per cent since 1991.

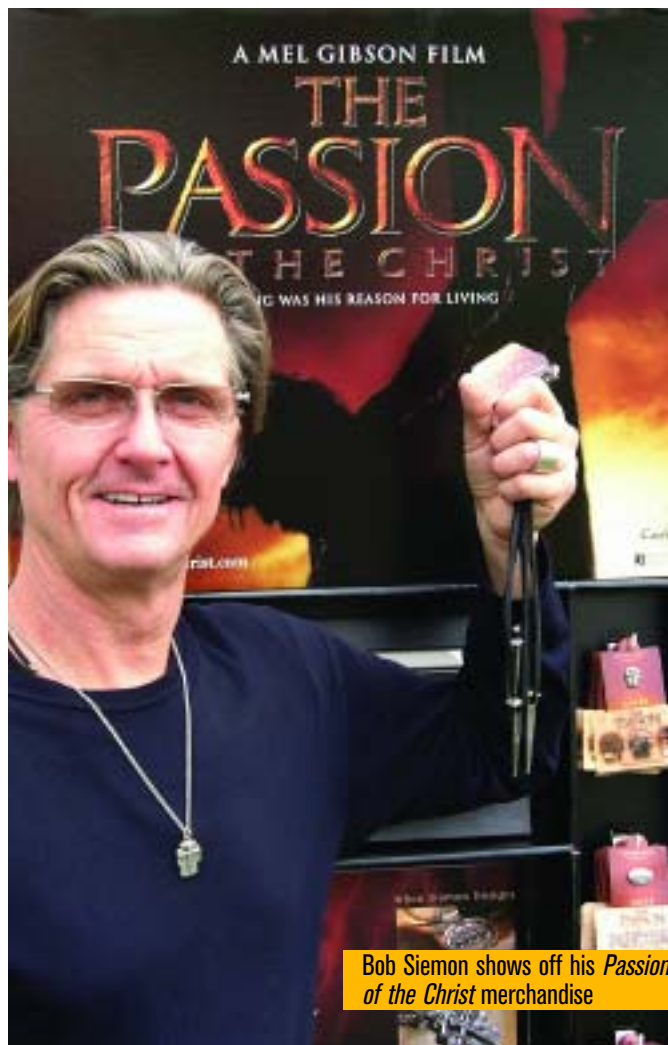
The answer, according to some Christian groups and businesses, is that while we may be turning away from the major faiths, we are at the same time embracing the idea of spirituality. "Canadians are spiritual... they may not ascribe to a

religion, but they are more about spiritual openness and that has a great deal of them looking for inspirational products to feed that spiritual hunger," says Graf.

This spirituality seems to be taking the form of evangelical Christianity. An Ipsos-Reid survey in 2003 found that 44 per cent of Canadians agree with the statement "I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian." This was an increase of 15 per cent since 1993. That number compares to only 16 per cent of respondents who say they attend church.

The message of Jesus appears to be strong, yet Canadians don't go to church to receive His word. Instead, they are turning on the radio or going to the movies or a store to get it. In other words, the message is now in the media. Jesus has entered the consumer age. So, how do you market Jesus without making Him just another product?

Thirty-five years ago Bob Siemon made a ring. The then 19-year-old had recently become a Christian and so he sat down one day and made a silver ring engraved with the words "Jesus saves." Siemon had previously made peace rings and thought he wanted something a little more significant for



Bob Siemon shows off his *Passion of the Christ* merchandise

himself. People saw the ring and liked it, so they asked him to make one for them too. Sure, he said, and then spent eight hours at home fashioning a ring just like his. He sold them for \$8. More people saw the rings and more asked for them until he was making one ring a day. After two years of one-ring-per-day, Siemon got on his bike and took his rings to a Christian bookstore in California, and then another and another.

Today Bob Siemon Designs has made 5,000 different products for more than 4,000 stores in the U.S. and over 500 in Canada. As important as that first ring was, Siemon will likely always be known for his nail.

A replica nail of the ones used to fasten Jesus to the cross was one of the products that his company created when it received a licence to make jewellery associated with *The Passion of the Christ*. It sold like crazy and also made some people uncomfortable with the idea that you could sell something that was so significant and so gruesome at the same time. The core of that discomfort came largely from non-Christians who thought the nail was the epitome of shameless capitalizing on Christ. But when Mel Gibson made his movie—which he had to fund himself and then try in vain to find a distributor—he had no plans to license anything, according to Siemon.

“Mel Gibson was not thinking of doing any kind of products regarding the movie at all,” says Siemon, a velvet-voiced ex-hippie who now employs approximately 200 people.

“I was contacted by a gentleman at Universal who was doing product procurement for films like *The Hulk* and he said he was going to go see this movie and he thought it would be perfect for us. A week later he calls just raving about this movie and he arranges an appointment to go see a screening at Mel Gibson’s [house].”

The film blew Siemon away. Afterward, he sat with Gibson. “It seemed like a wonderful movie to make products for,” he says. “[Gibson] sat with us for a good hour-plus, sharing why he made



it.” They then agreed that Siemon’s company would receive a licence to make jewellery based on the film. They later decided that the nail was the most powerful image they could use.

When the film came out, Siemon took all his employees to see it and offered to buy a bible for anyone who wanted a copy. Fifty people asked for bibles. Siemon, who calls himself “an old-fashioned, Jesus-people guy,” is somewhat rare in that his business makes decidedly Christian products, but he is quick to say there is no such thing as a Christian business.

At R.G Mitchell, their mission statement is “communicating the message together.” “We want to communicate the Christian message in any way we can, using all channels,” says Graf.

The Blessings chain, which started as a family business in Alberta, views its business as a ministry for Christ. “In our minds, we say that our message is ministry for Jesus and our method is retail,” says Cameron. “Our mission statement is to provide those with whom we come in contact with ways to discover the love of God through Christ-honouring products. What we sell has to match that mission statement.”

Siemon’s company has a statement, too: “Our mission is to reach the world with the message of hope by creating jewellery and gifts of exceptional quality, which will inspire people to

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express and share their faith.” It may sound somewhat similar to the previous ones, but Siemon draws a line between business and faith that the other so-called Christian businesses don't. “What's the purpose of a business?” he asks. “It is to make money. Every business starts out to make money. There's a bit of a contrast, a chasm between business and ministry. People that say they are a Christian business get these lofty thoughts, but they're not a ministry.”

Siemon says a ministry is “about serving people and giving things away and feeding the hungry—not making money.” He then tells a story of one Christian business that taught him why you have to run a business like a business, even though you may be selling religious material. “The very first Christian bookstore I walked into, the guy asked me, ‘Hey, do you know what it is to be a Christian? Would you like to pray and accept Jesus as your saviour?’”

Siemon spent a year going into the store to study the bible with the shop owner. “I watched him say the same thing to everybody that came in,” he says. “At the end of one year I watched that little Christian bookstore go out of business. He never focused on business: inventory, merchandising, marketing or cleaning the store. His ministry was lost because his business failed,” Siemon says. “Some people say ‘Gee, look at the money you make off of religion!’ But people want to wear a cross, so someone has got to make that cross. The only person who will be left is someone making money doing it.”

At the Blessings store in Ottawa, there were customers filling baskets, and the guy working in the flower shop next door came in to buy several children's colouring books. During our interview, Cameron emphasized how proud they were of the recent installation of a new, centralized computer system. After our call, he sent me a follow-up note

by e-mail: “You should note that Blessings has invested heavily in what we would consider cutting-edge technology with our state-of-the-art computer system. This system will speed the flow of product from the supplier to the customer, and will assist us in the management of our inventory, which we consider to be crucial to our survival.”

Over at CHRI, Tozer explained that the station's 30,000 to 40,000 listeners were very loyal and that businesses liked to advertise with them because the ads were less expensive and the listener base was so dedicated.

While some may call themselves ministries and have lofty mission statements (which they are very committed to), there is not that sense of being unprofessional that Siemon saw more than 30 years ago. This is one of the reasons—along with the move toward spirituality and the better and wider range of products—why Christian business is booming. They have now come to the point where there are chains, best-sellers and crossover success stories. They have done their jobs and run their businesses well—so well, in fact, that they created a new problem for themselves. That problem is Costco, Indigo and Wal-Mart. These megaliths see the sales figures and they want a piece, just like the major record labels saw the sales and decided to buy up Christian labels.

Costco now sells *The Purpose-Driven Life* and other Christian products and it is driving the prices down on merchandise. “One critical change in recent years has been the aggressiveness of major retailers, such as the Wal-Mart, Costcos and Superstores,” acknowledges Cameron. “This has forced many stores to try and compete at the ‘price level,’ which is not a sustainable long-term solution for any niche retailer.” (Costco made a bit of a blunder, however, when it seized land from a church in California to build a store.)

Graf says she receives complaints from many of the smaller Christian stores about her company supplying product to the 800-pound retail gorilla without a Christian mission statement. “They do complain, but our answer is that we always work to develop Christian bookstores and drive customers into their stores,” she says. “They carry a much broader range of titles than Costco ever would. Overall, it will improve Christian book sales, so they will benefit from it eventually.”

Along with the major retailers, companies like Hallmark have jumped into the space with its acquisition of the Christian-themed DaySpring Cards. At CHRI, Tozer knows it will only be a matter of time before the broadcasting heavyweights come knocking at his station's door. “When the stations get bigger and more successful, the CHUMs and the Rogers are gonna come and say ‘Can we buy you?’ because that's exact what happened with the music labels,” he says. “When they got big and started selling millions of copies instead of hundreds of thousands, the secular labels said ‘Can we buy you?’”

“I always fear that a big company will change what the message is about,” says Tozer as we sit at a table with a Holy Bible on it. “But I think that they bought up the labels to make money, so they know it is a niche market and will let it be what it is.”

Stuck to the French doors of the broadcast booth is a sign that says “Jesus in Control.” For now, at least, that seems to be the case.