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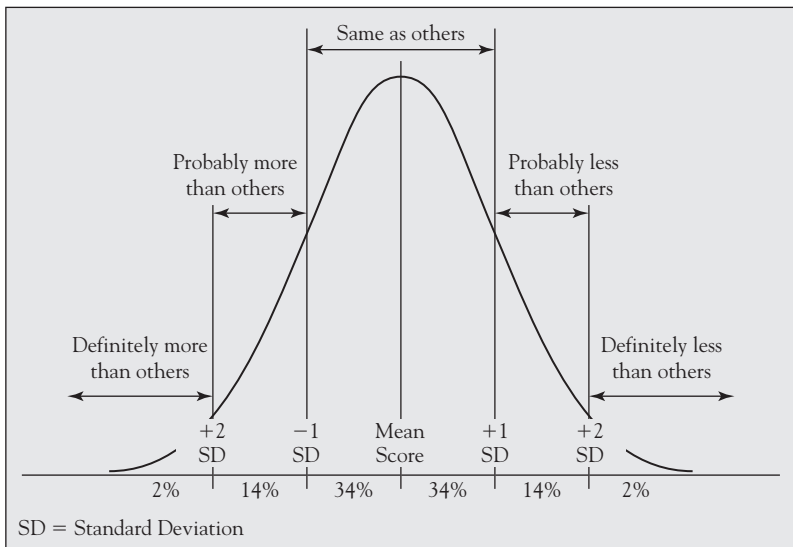
THE EXTREME WORLD

Kristyn, my wife, after talking with her sister Robyn, asked me if I had heard about the Extremely Focused Church conference in Colorado (her sister was going to it). I told her I hadn't heard about it. After some research, I realized she was talking about the Externally Focused Church conference (which I had heard about). But of the two conference names (one made up, one real), I like the sound of the Extremely Focused Church conference better, and that's saying a lot, because the idea of being externally focused resonates with me a great deal. There is something to be said for being extreme, particularly in our new world, which is filled with well curves and hybrids.

It's a Well-Curve World

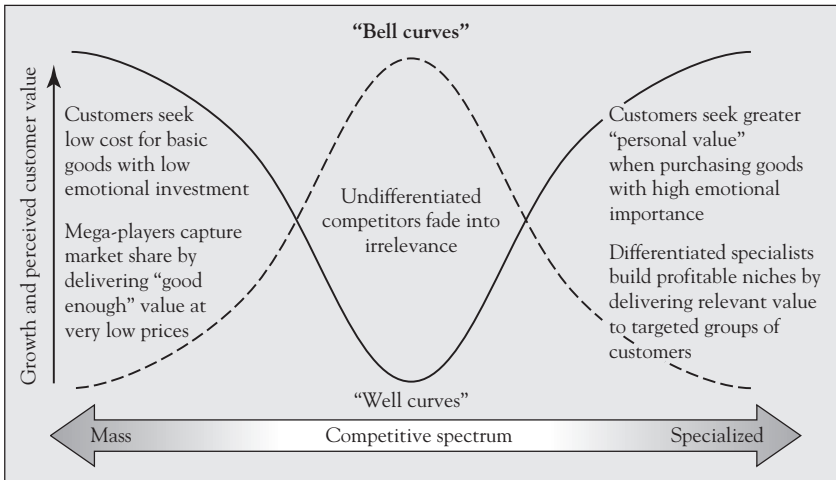
The bell curve is a statistical distribution pattern showing how the majority of people in a study of a particular social phenomenon will gravitate toward the middle of a range of outcomes. For example, most people have families of moderate size, are of moderate height, and get average grades. Because there are fewer extremely large families, and fewer extremely tall or short people, and fewer people who earn A's or F's, the data pertaining to these phenomena, plotted on a chart, take the form of a bell. Figure 1.1 shows a typical bell curve.

For decades, American business and culture have been formed to meet the needs of the middle range of consumers. The mass media have also been pointed toward the center. We have loved the word *general* in business—General Mills, General Motors, General Dynamics, General Electric. Mainstream culture has been organized around the general masses.

Figure 1.1 A Typical Bell Curve

When it comes to churches, however, mainline denominations do not command the position they used to. Over the past decade, a bimodal pattern has been emerging as sociological gravitations have moved toward the ends of a surveyed range and away from the middle. Pink has used the term *well curve* to describe this new trend: "Although bell curve distribution is still considered normal, a surprising number of economic and social phenomena now seem to follow a different arc. Instead of being high in the center and low on the sides, this new distribution is low in the center and high on the sides. Call it the well curve" (see Figure 1.2).¹

The well curve describes a world that is getting bigger and smaller at the same time. And the middle is falling out (for example, the middle class and middle management), and the extremes are becoming even more extreme (the lower and upper classes). Homes, television sets, and media are all getting larger and smaller at the same time. Bell-shaped curves are giving way to well-shaped curves, where the middle is not the high point but rather the low point. The extremes are the

Figure 1.2 The Well Curve

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value. The "well curver" concept was described in the following article: Pink, Daniel H. "The Shape of Things to Come," *Wired*. May 2003.

high points. The middle is a tar pit. Examples of the shrinking middle abound:

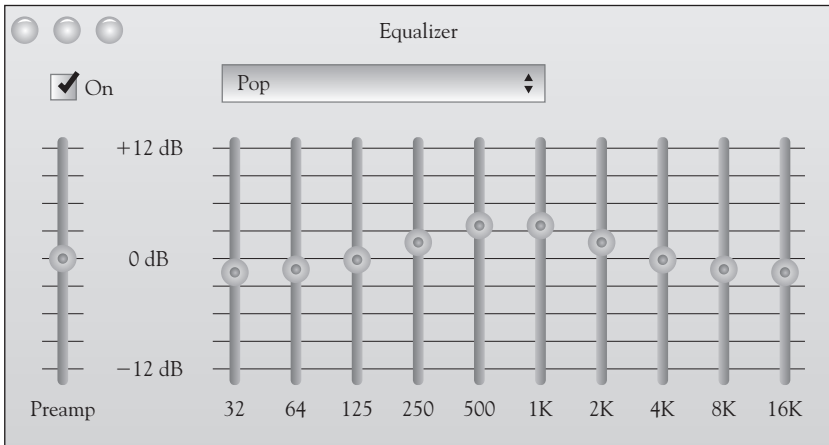
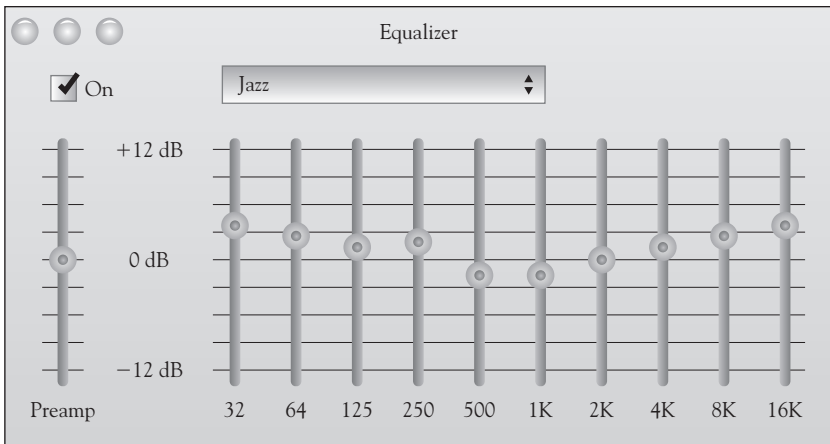
- The rise in sales of either very big TVs (60-inch plasma) or very small ones (incorporated into cell phones), and the severe decline in the sale of midsize ones (such as the old 27-inch TV)
- The release of more automobiles of the extremely small and big varieties, and the decline in popularity of midsize vehicles
- The growth of organizations through mergers and acquisitions, or their shrinkage through spinoffs
- The rise in huge multinational federations (NAFTA, the European Union, and so on), with the simultaneous multiplication of independent states and secessionist movements
- Increasing or shrinking portions at restaurants
- The rise in the number of students scoring in the highest and lowest ranges on standardized tests, and the drop in the number of students scoring in the middle ranges

- The increase in the number of people earning at the top and the bottom of the income scale, and the decrease in the number of people earning a middle-class income
- The increase in the number of consumers flocking either toward high-end products or toward cheap products while fleeing products in the middle ground
- The rising popularity of extreme sports—and of golf
- Increasing polarization of politics toward the left and the right, with movement away from the center
- The proliferation of megaretailers as well as of niche boutiques

The middle may still be where most people are, but it is no longer the place where most people desire to be or plan to stay. Words like *average*, *medium*, and *middle* have fallen in popularity. And whereas companies used to gravitate to the word *general*, they no longer do. The slogan for today's culture is "Wherever you end up, don't end up in the middle."

As a basketball official, I can tell you that the worst place from which to see the play is the middle of the floor, right under the basket. You are much better off at one side or the other, in order to get a wide-angle view of the court. In fact, officials are taught to imagine the area below the basket as quicksand. You don't want to find yourself there, and if you do, you want to get out of there as quickly as possible and go wide.

Even popular music has shifted away from the comfortable middle to a more dynamic range. When I was young, I was coached in how to set the equalizer on my stereo. My equalizer had sliders from low to high frequency. For best effect, I was encouraged to create a bell-shaped curve with these sliders, with lower settings of highs and lows and a greater midrange. This would not tune to the modern ear, however. Old-school pop has given way to modern jazz stylings, with a lower midrange, higher highs, and lower lows (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4).

Figure 1.3 Pop Settings for a Stereo's Equalizer**Figure 1.4 Jazz Settings for a Stereo's Equalizer**

Where is the worst place to be assigned a seat on an airplane? The dreaded middle seat. What is the worst kind of drink you can be served? The room-temperature, lukewarm, “spew you out of my mouth” kind. It is much better to be either inside or outside, hot or cold.

Today the middles are in trouble, and the edges seem vital. According to Sweet, who explores this model in the realm of a chain of coffeehouses, one of the keys to the success of Starbucks is the company's gravitation toward giving the consumer an extreme experience—extreme comfort, extreme tastiness, extreme hotness.² Maxwell House, by contrast, is stuck in the middle. The days of the happy medium (and of a related word, *mediocre*) are gone.

How does the well curve apply to the church? Relationships are one of the areas where I don't think you can go partway and be successful. If you are going to make your ministry about relationships, then really make your ministry about relationships. Don't go halfway. You can't "kind of" make community a priority. You have to go full-on.

And how does the model of the disappearing middle apply to the church? Here are three of the many ways, according to Hall:

- *Membership*. Some congregations are raising the bar and giving membership greater emphasis; others are dropping membership.
- *Money*. There are fewer "average" givers.
- *Manpower*. There is a shrinking role for moderately involved volunteers.³

But I think the greatest application of this model to the church is in overall positioning. The medium-size church of a few hundred people, once prized, now doesn't seem attractive. It is neither big enough for impact nor small enough for intimacy.

And yet the brighter the light, the darker the shadows. I was talking with a friend who is a leader in a traditional denominational church. He was telling me about a worship director his church was about to hire. Evidently she is very gifted and qualified. A very proficient pianist. A very powerful vocalist. Sounded pretty good on the surface. Maybe too good, actually. The number of times my friend used the word *very* to describe her raised a red flag for me. I said to him, "Challenges often attend the word

very.” To be specific, a few years ago I hired a young lady to be a worship director. She was an extremely gifted violinist. In fact, she was so good that she is now living in Nashville, working with some of the biggest names in the music industry. She brought tremendous value onstage, but to make her compensation make sense, I also had her doing some things for me in the office (setting up small groups, answering phones, and so on). She was a way better performer than a clerk. If we could have opened up her skull, we would have found that the right side of her brain (the creative side) was musclebound and that the left side (the analytical side) was shrumpy. Corresponding to the overdeveloped part was an underdeveloped part. I call this phenomenon of the shadows that attend extremes the *bright-light quandary*. Taking the example of talent, you can see that as the light gets brighter, the shadows become more intense. What to do about the shadows? Do not turn down the light. Instead, turn on the backlight. Counterbalance with the opposite extreme. You do have to cover the blind spots, and they tend to be more dramatic the more you have to use the word *very* to describe the strength.

It's a Hybrid World

Hybrid is a hot word in our mash-up culture. Hybrid forms provide us with elements of two desired outcomes. A hybrid is an attempt to get the best of both worlds. Hybrid vehicles, for example, give us economy with performance.

There are hybrid dogs, toaster ovens, and schools. Hybrid forms result when two elements of different entities are mixed for a particular purpose. They bring together the best of two worlds. Here are some examples of hybrid forms:

In mythology, a creature combining body parts of two or more species

In biology, the offspring resulting from cross-breeding of different plants or animals

In etymology, a word with mixed origins

In the world of bicycles, a model combining the design features of a road bike and a mountain bike

In automotive transportation, a car that combines an internal combustion engine with an electric motor

In finance, an economic vehicle that combines elements of debt and equity

In golf, a type of club that combines elements of a driver and an iron

In video games, human avatars with alien characteristics

In the world of churches, a congregation that achieves the best of both intimacy and impact

In our hybrid world, the extremes are becoming more extreme, but the poles of the emerging well curve are also being bridged in various ways.

For example, both quality and convenience are having their day in transportation. Harley-Davidson can ship four hundred thousand motorcycles per year. Confederate Motorcycle, based in New Orleans, builds high-performance \$62,000 bikes but sells fewer than one hundred per year. Confederate is not trying to compete with Harley for market share. Confederate is focused on breakthrough performance and design innovations, and that's all.

You can also see combinations of higher convenience and higher quality in some business models that have come forward in the music industry. There is a place for both kinds of value. Musicians are allowing their music to be downloaded at low quality and cost (in some cases letting the consumer name the price) and at the same time they are providing high-quality concerts and CDs with extra content. In response to extremes in convenience, you are also seeing extraordinary value-added packaging. From the same artist you can now download a twelve-second ringtone of a popular song or order a four-DVD set with live concert and studio footage.

Bounty, the manufacturer of paper towels, has found that people are actually polarized over which value proposition—smallness or bigness—they favor overall. Bounty researched the reaction of people to a smaller size of paper towel (six inches by eleven inches) and found that one in four people will select a smaller towel when given the option. The company also found that many people did not want a smaller sheet at all, ever, and that they preferred the full-size square towel. Bounty's solution? The company created a paper towel from which the consumer can tear off one, two, or three sections, according to his or her needs and tastes. Do people want a smaller or a bigger towel? Yes. At different times? Yes. In different combinations? Yes.

Speaking of technology and packaging, one day I was browsing YouTube videos on my phone and caught myself avoiding the longer video clips. I did not want to have to put up with the buffering times for clips of a minute or more, and so I began to gravitate to clips that were sixty seconds or less. When I realized what I was doing, an idea came to my mind—the sixty-second sermon. The idea is pretty simple, really—a video that would include a reading of scripture, an explanation, an illustration, and a summary. In the middle of the workday, maybe at a stoplight or during a work break, a person could watch a brief sermon and have a moment of inspiration. Who says that spiritual content has to be delivered in thirty to thirty-five minutes? And yet I have sensed a growing desire for deeper Bible teaching that cannot be accommodated on a typical Sunday morning, and so I am strategizing about providing several hours of biblical and theological instruction on a weeknight.

There is demand for both. For example, as things now come at us in miniature, Johnson sees a “snacklash” in our culture, with people wanting not just want bite-size content but also the full-meal deal:

If we're truly living in a snack culture, how come so many forms of entertainment—TV shows, games, movies—are getting

longer? Most of us, I suspect, have had this experience lately: You tell a friend that they simply have to start watching one of the new long-format dramas, like *Heroes* or *The Wire*. There's no question of picking it up midseason. They've got to go back and start at the very beginning—using iTunes or BitTorrent or Netflix to catch up—or they'll be utterly confused. Invariably, your sales pitch also comes with the disclaimer that they'll have to watch four or five episodes before they really get hooked. Some of the most complex shows—like *Deadwood* or *Lost*—take multiple episodes just to introduce all the main characters.

Think about that: At roughly 45 minutes an episode, that means viewers will readily invest two to three hours in a show just to get oriented. The story itself can stretch on for dozens of hours. (*The Sopranos*, for instance, should top out at nearly 75 hours when it ends this spring.) Television has always had serial narratives, but aside from soap operas, each episode was traditionally designed to stand on its own. A midseason hour of *Kojak* made perfect sense in isolation. But you'd need *Cliffs Notes* to follow a midseason installment of *24* cold.⁴

In today's culture, there is interplay across the spectrum. Just as customers want both low cost and high quality, both the personal and the professional, both the informal and the formal, both freedom and structure, both caring and competing, those of us in the church want the intimacy of smallness and the impact of bigness, if we can have both. Intimacy and impact seem to pull away from each other, like the two poles of a magnet. But they are both desirable in the church. How do we achieve a balance between the church as a close-knit family and the church as a world-changing army? We can achieve that balance in one of two ways; by heading toward the middle or by counterbalancing on the edges, just as you can balance a teeter-totter by coming to the middle and straddling the fulcrum, or by having equivalent weight applied to each end of the board. Of the two approaches, I prefer balancing by

extremes, that is, becoming extreme in both respects, intimacy and impact.

In fact, extremes in two directions are actually characteristic of Christianity. As Chesterton notes, “We want not an amalgam or compromise, but both things at the top of their energy; love and wrath both burning.”⁵ In the area of worship, for example, if the extremes are “rockin’ out” at one end of the teeter-totter and old-time hymns at the other, then it might be better for us to use an extreme version of each style in a single service—really rockin’ out, and really singing hymns—than to try to put the two styles in a blender and come out with something that doesn’t give us the taste of either. I know from experience that “blended” worship is not very tasty. You have to go to extremes.

In the digital world, we now have delivery mechanisms for more of everything (shorter and longer, smaller and bigger, lo-fi and hi-fi, and so on). While brief, grainy YouTube clips circulate virally online, the average length of a major motion picture has expanded from ninety minutes to over two hours. Consumers have gotten used to making choices that alternate between high fidelity and low convenience, and between low fidelity and high convenience. For instance, there are various ways in which a person can watch a movie, and there are trade-offs involved with each (see Table 1.1).

Given options across this spectrum, consumers are saying, “Yes, yes, and yes.” You can watch a sitcom or a “bitcom.” You can read a self-published e-book online or buy a novel in print

Table 1.1 Fidelity and Convenience

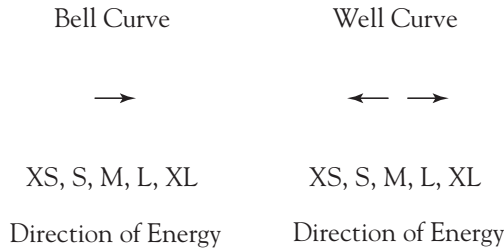
	<i>Theatre</i>	<i>Home Theatre</i>	<i>Mobile</i>
Fidelity	***	**	*
	Wide screens	Big-screen TV	Tiny screen
Convenience	*	**	***
	Travel, cost	Ability to pause	In pocket

at a forty-thousand-square-foot Barnes and Noble bookstore. Movies, television shows, songs, and games come packaged like cookies or chips or in large combo packs. Sporting events get encapsulated in highlight clips on ESPN but are also available on demand via satellite. Young people consume 140-word tweets while devouring six-hundred-page tomes like *Twilight* and the books in the *Harry Potter* series. There are still blockbusters in film, literature, and music, but now, because of online retailers, we are not beholden to “the man.”

There is a growing appetite for cell cinema—short-subject films designed to be viewed on a palm-size screen. For example, director Frank Chindamo’s Fun Little Movies studio provides original content for Sprint cell phone customers. Slowly he is luring big-screen stars like Sharon Stone to the super-small screen. Hooray for Cellywood! “Blogs reduced the newspaper to the post. In TV, it’ll go from the network to the show,” says Jeff Jarvis, founder of *Entertainment Weekly*.⁶ As viewing habits become more atomized, people no longer watch entire shows, just the parts they care about.

The evolution from mainframe computers to the networked PC was one of the most significant cultural changes to happen in our lifetime. It forecast the shift from the centralized, top-down way of doing business to the interconnected, bottom-up way. The small can act big. The big can act small. The growth in possibilities has followed the arc of architectural innovations that shrank the size of hard disk drives from fourteen inches in diameter to eight inches, five and one-quarter inches, three and one-half inches, two and one-half inches, and now one and one-eighth inch.

Through each epoch of globalization, extremes have become empowered. But the old bell curve values greater size and performance. The new well curve presses the extreme in both directions—the bigger is getting bigger, and the smaller is getting smaller. The energy is now going in two directions, not just one. The left side of the graph, not just the right side, has been increasingly empowered (see Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5 Direction of Energy

As Thomas Friedman says, the world has become smaller as it has become bigger: “In Globalization 1.0, which began around 1492, the world went from size large to size medium. In Globalization 2.0, the era that introduced us to multinational companies, it went from size medium to size small. And then around 2000 came Globalization 3.0, in which the world went from being small to tiny.”⁷ Meanwhile, as the world has become smaller, in the past decade large companies have grown even larger, particularly those in a position to support the newfound power of individuals to collaborate. The modern world has gone from big to small. Next step: both. We are becoming an hourglass society, where we must learn to kiss and punch at the same time.

Sweet describes emerging combinations:

One example of how to bring the ends together in a well-curve world, and the benefits of a simultaneous engagement of both ends of the continuum, is the competing food habits of indulgence and wellness. “Contradictory consumers” are going in opposite directions at the same time. We go from Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream or Krispy Kreme Donuts to the organic salad bar or raw juice bar.

We live in a Godiva culture of indulgence layered upon indulgence lathered with a whipped-cream topping of guilty pleasures and a final red cherry of repentance. This is also a culture obsessed with weight and health consciousness. We have the highest obesity rates in the world, and eating disorders run

rampant. How do you bring these “dueling extremes” of death-by-chocolates and squeaky-clean foods together?

The blended, cut-to-the-middle solution of the bell-curve world was to introduce low-cal, low-fat chocolate. That didn’t work. Why eat chocolate if you can’t enjoy the fat-drenched flavor of decadence? People want the experience of luxurious chocolate. They don’t want halfway, diluted experiences of chocolate. But they also want a responsible weight-management program, one that can make a difference and not just create delusions of health.

The key is to offer consumers two opposite experiences at the same time. Hence portion-controlled chocolates. Nestle’s Butterfinger Stixx and Hershey’s Sticks offer the binge experience of chocolate in a way that doesn’t adversely impact the body. Hershey’s Sticks, with a tagline promising a “convenient guilt-free way to indulge in chocolate,” is available in an eleven-gram, sixty-calorie bar, with a choice of milk, dark, caramel, or mint-flavored chocolate. In a similar vein, Nabisco has introduced 100 Calorie Packs (portion-control versions of indulgent snacks such as Oreos and Cheese Nips).⁸

Part of CTK’s appeal is that you will often find us at both ends of the teeter-totter. Instead of being a church that is somewhere in between big and small, or neither big nor small, we’ve become extremely big as a network and quite small as individual groups and centers. We’ve expanded rapidly by simultaneously strengthening the core and expanding the frontier. We’ve been engaging because our services present bleeding-edge music with old-fashioned biblical teaching. We’ve reached a balance by being extremely graceful and truthful, not by being slightly both. There is a danger today of getting caught in the quicksand of the middle ground. Go to extremes.