

Reformed Reflections

Circulation of the Saints (1)

Is bigger always better? Does the future lie with large complex and anonymous institutions such as the 100,000 square foot supermarket, super- malls, and the megachurches which average over one thousand or more in worship every week? What does it say of the church in North America when *Newsweek* can note that "the least demanding churches are now in the greatest demand"? Or when one church can advertise: "Instead of me fitting a religion, I found a religion to fit me"? Why the uncritical espousal of "relevance" and the newly-coined slogans such as "seeker- friendly," "audience-driven," and "full-service churches" and their stated mission to reach the "unchurched Harrys and Marys," or "Boomers," understood as "Believers Outside Of Most Every Religious System"?

Willow Creek

The trend-setting Willow Creek Community Church, founded in 1975, draws 17,000-plus every weekend for six services. When its huge new building was finished, nobody in the Chicago area thought it looked like a church. On the outside it had the appearance of a convention hall, on the inside like a 5,000-seat theatre. And the minister didn't wear a clerical robe. He was dressed in ordinary clothes, he was "breezy and compelling; by turns funny and serious; and always utterly irresistible." In *Christianity Today* (Nov. 13, 2000) Verla Gillmor, a member of Willow Creek, describes the services as programmed with cutting-edge music, drama, and teaching to reach the unchurched. "The services 'wow' factor is aided by 50 vocalists, a 75-piece choir, seven rhythms bands, a 65- piece orchestra, 41 actors, a video production department, and an arts center with 200 students that serves as a farm club for future talent." The influence of the Willow Creek worship model for seeker services has made its influence felt also in the Christian Reformed Church worship services, says Dr. Emily Brink, "due in part to strong encouragement from the CRC's Home Missions agency" (*Calvin Theological Journal*, Nov. 1997.)

Mars Hill Bible Church

Another way of "doing" church is the independent, postmodern, evangelical Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. It was established in 1999 and already has one of the largest churches in the United States with an attendance of 10,000 for worship in a former shopping mall. Its mall setting is viewed as nonthreatening and comfortable for people looking for a new kind of worship experience. The church is conveniently accessible for worshippers who drive to one of the three Sunday services. The sanctuary is nearly an acre of white open space filled with about 3,400 gray plastic chairs. Mars Hill's 32-year old "skateboarding, guitar- thrashing, bleached-hair pastor," pastor Rob Bell graduated from Wheaton College with a psychology degree. While at Wheaton he formed a touring Christian rock band for which he sang and wrote music. In 1995 he graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

Mars Hill's worshippers claim that Bell's Bible teaching is "funny, imaginative, informative" and the centerpiece of Mars Hills phenomenal growth. They also say that they "like being able to walk into church with a cup of coffee, spiked hair and jeans." How should we view the recent emergence of so many megachurches? Are they a threat to most existing congregations, and perhaps even to the institutional expression of Christianity in North America? Or are they a passing fad that will be largely forgotten by the middle of the 21st century? In this series I will address these questions and show that their phenomenal rise must be seen within the context of our rapidly changing times and mores which impacted the church and society.

Worship Wars

During the last few decades more careful attention has been paid to worship than at any other period in church history. We have now entered the age of "worship wars." Never has there been so much conflict over worship as in our time. Worship conferences have increased ten-fold in the past ten years. Many churches have worship committees to assist the pastor in preparing for services. Christian bookstores, magazines, and web sites provide us with praise songs, prayer texts, and worship service outlines. Even in Reformed churches, where worship services were uniform across the board, the unexpected can be expected. Already in 1985 Rev. John H. Piersma wrote in *The Outlook* (Dec. 1985) that in the congregations of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church, "one can find most anything, from the simplest to the most complex, from the most traditional to an almost innovationism. It seems as if there is little consensus to what Reformed worship is, what the principles are that govern it." People argue about "traditional" versus "contemporary" forms of worship, organists vs. guitarists, supporters of classical or liturgical styles vs. those who favour folk or evangelistic styles. This split between "traditional" and "contemporary" worship style usually divides a congregation along age lines, and consequently the older members are deprived of the energy and exuberance of the youth, and the young and new believers lose the opportunity to gain from the experience and maturity of the older members. And these questions about worship are not limited to the Reformed family of churches. Other denominations, ranging from Baptist to Anglican, are in the same boat. And the worship wars continue on unabated.

"Worship wars" are a scandal and a travesty to the body of Christ. In the midst of the noise of battle people tend to forget why they worship. If worship is primarily for God, why then assume that one's particular taste in music just happens to exactly coincide with God's taste in music? How can God be honoured with Christians engaged in wars over worship?

Marva Dawn queries in her wonderful book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*: "The 'worship wars' that rage in so many congregations are preventing us from truly being the Church. Can we find some way to prevent discussion about worship styles from becoming fierce and bitter battles waged between two entrenched camps?"

Our Changing Times

Some of the most significant changes in worship today have come with little awareness that Scripture or history has much to teach us. These changes have come while the Church in the West suffers from a loss of certainty, a loss of what it means to be the Church of Christ, and a loss of a commonly accepted understanding of God. How can churches escape sacrificing the Gospel on the "altar of the latest trends and fads"? Since the 1960s we have witnessed traumatic changes in our society, even more so in Canada than in the United States. Canadians were part of a culture that had largely been imported from Western Europe. Their values were conveyed in such words as duty, honour, country, flag, patriotism, family, church, faith, loyalty, self-sacrifice, purpose, modesty, and responsibility. Bonds, whether of marriage, school, employment, or church life, were durable. Divorce did not come easily; education was mandatory; jobs were necessary, church involvement was expected. People's expectations were compatible with the values taught by their churches. Today membership in mainline denominations continues to dwindle. Some members left for evangelical churches, others left for no church at all. Consequently, denominational loyalty is no longer as strong as in the past.

Compared with the past, Christians today influence culture less. The information technologies, particularly radio, television, and the Internet, surely played a hand in promoting the global changes in the past century, and the Church has not remained immune. Someone said, "The impact of modernity in the United States means that the Christian faith has lost much of its integrity and effectiveness in shaping the lives of believers." And what is true of the United States is even more so of multicultural-postmodern Canada. Individual rights are stressed over social rules and judges have become referees. The only authority is "private experience." With a growing sense of alarm we witness the disintegration of family life, the growing mindless violence, the vandalism which finds satisfaction in destroying whatever is comely and useful, and the growing destruction of the environment by limitless consumption fuelled by ceaseless advertising. We fear the constant threat of terrorist attacks. September 11, 2001, has reminded us of the horrific reality of evil and hell. Yet in the midst of all these apocalyptic events, the spiritual light of the church is dim. Dr. J.I. Packer comments, "The secular community goes downhill like the Gadarene swine rushing towards the edge of the cliff; the church has lost its influence, and cannot stop the decline."

Conclusion

How should we respond to the call of evangelism through such modern means of "growing churches," of management, marketing, and megachurches? Our Lord's Great Commission has not changed. The Gospel must spread. The body of Christ is meant to grow, in size as well as in maturity (Ephesians 4:15). On the one hand, not to be interested in numbers seems to me a profoundly unevangelical and unreformed statement.

On the other hand, Jesus never told us that we had to be big, successful, attractive to nonmembers, or like the culture in which we live. Furthermore, how can Reformed worship be relevant to contemporary culture and recover a sense of mystery, joy, and awe without losing its distinctively Reformed character? *In A Royal Waste of Time*, Marva Dawn observes, "Our world is desperate for God. In the face of growing postmodern despair and chaos, the escalating gap between rich and poor, the intensifying violence and global political and economic confusions, our world desperately needs worship services where God is encountered in as much of his fullness as possible."
(To be continued)

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