

## Circulation of the Saints (5)

### Pop goes the culture - Change goes the church

The Sixties was more than a decade. It was the beginning of a Cultural Revolution. This is what changed: Trust in authority diminished. Youth began to lose respect for the older generation and its values. Rock'n'roll, firmly rooted in the black music of rhythm and blues, emerged. Rock lyrics became suffused with the language of emotion. The words "need, want, and feel" were their key components. White country and western music was also influential in shaping this new sound. It became "the music of the young," something that accentuated their differences from the adult world and their bond with each other. Social pressure, especially on young listeners, to be up on all the latest tunes, as well as on all the latest rock gossip, became a problem. It was a time of mass-marketing music. Popular records began selling in the millions for the first time in history. The Beatles entered the international rock scene. Millions of boys copied their hair style. Billboards appeared across the United States proclaiming, "Beautify America - Get A Haircut." By the 1970s, rock was well entrenched, not only as an acceptable option for listening, but as an increasingly prevalent form in worship services which were once dominated by high culture or traditional culture.

Postmodernism: the new buzzword, By the end of the 20th century, postmodernism came to represent the spirit of the age. The results spread rapidly throughout the world and entered every major aspect of contemporary life. It is the preferred philosophy of the consumers' society. The average non-churched postmodernist considers himself his own god. Nowadays many people are more controlled by the mindset of postmodernism than by other currents. Postmodernists emphasize belief in themselves and their own inner strength. They value independence and choice. They have great tolerance of all kinds of beliefs and behaviours on the part of others, which is closely linked with their own feeling of self-esteem, self-realization, self-help, and self-fulfilment. In *Fit Bodies. Fat Minds* Os Guinness observes, "Everything in postmodern America is up for sale. Everything is a matter of taste and style. Everything can be used for something else. The 'do-your-own-thing' of the sixties has become the 'create-your-own- reality' of the eighties and nineties."

Captured by Culture Christians are called to go into every culture with the Gospel. How do we reach our culture, which is post-Christian and is often anti-Christian? In *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* Kenneth Myers solemnly warns that the challenge of living with public culture may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and the plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries. He says, "Being thrown to the lions or living in the shadow of gruesome death are fairly straightforward if unattractive threats. Enemies that come loudly and visibly are usually much easier to fight than those that are undetectable. Physical affliction (even to the point of death) for the sake of Christ is a heavy cross, but at least it can be readily recognized at the time as a trial of faith. But the erosion of character, the spoiling of innocent pleasures, and the cheapening of life itself that often accompanies popular

culture can occur so subtly that we believe nothing has happened." But what has happened to many churches in North America? Instead of holding our culture at a critical distance, they have adopted a virtually uncritical attitude toward popular culture. In fact, they have used forms of popular culture without much resistance, in the alleged interest of promoting the Gospel. There are even disturbing signs that many contemporary Christians have made popular cultural trends their own. In *Mosaic Madness* Reginald W. Bibby observes that for the most part, Canada's religious groups have been captured by culture. And Canadian churches are merely following trends set by American culture. They themselves have not been calling the agenda shots. There is little doubt as the source of the cultural directives. As Peter Berger has put it, "Relevance and timeliness are defined for the society at large," including religion, "primarily by the media." He adds the cautionary footnote that, as such, religion's attempt to be relevant is a fragile business. When I read the *Globe and Mail's* Arts Notebook (Nov.29,2003) about the Christian Reformed Churches in Calgary, I wondered whether they had paid attention to Bibby's observation. For example, it states that after the New Hope congregation was entertained by electric guitars, they were treated to bagels and coffee and clips from the second installment of director Peter Jackson's film version of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. According to Rev. John VanSloten using the messages from the film is a way to connect with Calgarians using culturally relevant language. During the service, themes such as fighting injustice and forces of good and evil were explored.

Postmodernism and Music Postmodernism has had its impact on music. Some contemporary music, both secular and sacred, is more in tune with feeling than with the intellect. The volume is so loud that it almost overwhelms the senses. The content of the songs is often minimal and repeated numerous times, in some cases in mantra-fashion. One simply feels, rather than thinks about, what is happening. Many churches adopted this new trend without too much questioning. Worship became more feeling and experience oriented rather than God directed. Contemporary Christian music focusses on the worshipper and his interest. It has an entertainment approach that attracts the crowds but fails to lead them into the praise of God's person and redeeming work. Furthermore, what is called contemporary worship music is often more like the soft rock of the Sixties.

Megachurches and Music Many in the church growth movement employ an uncritical understanding of modernity and its insights and tools. In *Worship Seeking Understanding* John D. Witvliet points out that given the prominent features of North American culture, there is absolutely nothing surprising about the emergence of megachurches and music. He notes that what was common throughout the history of worship in North America - popular culture, not elite or highbrow culture - drives their worship practices. These churches are often known not by their creeds they profess or by the programs they offer but by the worship, and especially the music, they celebrate. Most megachurches have ignored or dismissed traditional forms of Christian liturgy. Some musicians at megachurches choose music for reasons that having nothing to with the purposes of Christian worship. Church-growth consultant Gary L.MCIntosh advises pastors to ask: "What does the music of your church indicate about your church's ability

to adapt in appropriate ways to culture? Are you using any music that was written in the last five years? Ten years? What cultural era does most of your music reflect?" However, despite appearing as a people's movement, much of the contemporary Christian music does not originate in congregational and denominational circles, but in private music companies. Its popularity depends overwhelmingly on the pastors of megachurches and music business executives. Contemporary music is not organ-friendly. Consequently, the number of organ students has declined dramatically in the last decade. And churches will continue to have a harder time finding qualified organists. Praise teams are featured. But if that is the only kind of worship a community has, how will a congregation learn to lament? The longer psalms and hymn texts, jam-packed with theological content, are exchanged for the shorter choruses or ditties that engage the emotions more simply and directly. Some songs feature questionable theology or have little musical merit. Indeed, the lack of content or even traditional grammatical structure or correct punctuation is not considered necessary as long as the music engages the heart. For example, one of the many songs featured on Willow Creek's web site is All The Faith You Need. One of the verses says: "And you may never have the whole thing figured out. And you may always have a shadow of a doubt. But just hang on and let Him take the lead." And the song ends with the line "He is gonna give you all the faith you need" to be repeated eight times.

Congregational singing In the Reformed worship tradition congregational singing is God-directed and not centred on feelings. Singing together also brings out the essential mystery of the church as a fellowship. The Church Father Ignatius (d.c. 110 A.D.) left the following image of the church unified in song: "Wherefore your accord and harmonious love is a hymn to Jesus Christ. Yes, one and all, you should form yourself into a choir, so that, in perfect harmony and taking your pitch to God, you may sing in unison and with one voice to the Father through Jesus Christ."

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