

# Circulation of the Saints (9)

## What is a Church ?

How do we answer the question, "What is the church?" Is the church a voluntary association of spiritual consumers, an entertainment complex, or a therapeutic clinic? From the time of the 18th century Great Awakening, American evangelicalism has tended to pit the individual believer's relationship with Christ over against the institutional church. Consequently, church membership, as a permanent commitment to a local church, is minimized in this individualistic approach.

## Contemporary Worship

This spirit of individualism is reflected to its extreme in the current worship wars. Instead, of worshipping together as a community of believers and their children, some megachurches may include five different worship services: one for seekers, one for new believers, one for learners, one for those ready to be transformed into disciples, and one for the disciples ready to be challenged to become apostles.

I have often been asked, "What do you think about contemporary worship services?" Should we have a traditional as well as a contemporary service each Sunday morning? As I will show in another article, this division goes against what the church is in the light of Scripture. But from a practical perspective, the division into a "traditional" and "contemporary" service is destructive because these terms are so poorly defined. Which tradition do we mean? Dutch Reformed? Scottish Presbyterian? Evangelical? Charismatic? What is meant by contemporary? When a congregation divides the body into a "traditional" and a "contemporary" service, this often separates the old from the young according to their preference for what they know. The result is that the younger and older members no longer meet together for worship. Young families no longer worship next to those more experienced in the faith, who could be mentors to them - and the old are bereft of the vitality of the young.

## Megachurches

Does the marketplace rather than God Himself determine what the church is to be? The individualist view of the church is imbedded in current strategies for church growth, as they are based on a market view of the church. According to the church growth experts a growing church must always form new small groups in order to accommodate new interests and to give members and seekers the potential to develop an intimate network of family-like relationships. Most megachurches affirm the fact that they are congregations of groups, classes, choirs, cells, circles, social networks, task forces, organizations, and fellowships. This strategy appears benign enough. But, at the bottom, the small group strategy fragments a church. This model of being a church resembles a typical civic organization more than the church of Christ. Another symptom of this individualist approach to the church is the parachurch (along side the church)

movement. In fact, the development of the megachurches must be considered in the light of the rise of this American phenomenon.

## **Parachurches**

Starting virtually from scratch in the depth of the Great Depression, evangelicals built a network of interdenominational agencies that by the 1940s became increasingly visible. It began to dominate Protestant evangelicalism, foreign missions, publishing, and broadcasting. To a substantial degree that first wave of mid-twentieth-century parachurch organizations focused on evangelistic efforts to reach younger generations with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Time has shown that the parachurch entrepreneurs were very good at what they did. By the 1970s more and more congregations were turning to parachurch organizations for resources. The 1990s saw the emergence of the independent teaching church as a significant source of resources for congregational leaders. For example, the Willow Creek Community Church, Saddleback and Schuller's "Institute for Successful Church Leadership" draw hundreds of pastors to their teaching sessions each year.

## **The Board Model**

Megachurches are usually governed by a board. Lyle Schaller points out that a 1,500 member congregation is likely to function with a governing board of 7 to 15 adults, including the pastor who has both voice and vote. The central theme of the board is not to be sensitive to the collective wishes of the members, but rather to challenge and enable every member to be engaged in doing ministry. It works with the program staff in expanding ministry and challenges the people to provide the resources required to implement creativity. In other words, the governing structure is limited to a few people. "Was that a good decision?" becomes the criterion, not who made it. Schaller says, "To put it very simply, the structure of a pure democracy in congregational governance and the high level of performance expected by the constituents of the megachurch are incompatible. "

## **CEO (Chief Executive Officer)**

The waning interest in theology and the minister as a theologian has resulted in a rash of prominent "pastor-therapists" and "pastor-managers." A study in the 1980s, involving forty-seven denominations, showed that indeed the modern pastor's profile has greatly expanded. Pastors were expected to be open, affirming, able to foster relationships, experienced in facilitating discussions, and so on. The new premium was on skills in interpersonal relationships and conflict management. Biblical and spiritual criteria of ministry were optional. One eminent Christian leader returned from a church-growth conference puzzled. There has been "literally no theology", he said. In fact, there had been no serious reference to God at all."

Megachurch advocates usually dismiss seminary training for pastors. As a matter of fact, many of the founding pastors of today's megachurches are not graduates of accredited theological schools. In *Today's Pastors*, George Barna argues that the

alternative ministry preparation path is for a person to tell his church leaders he wishes to enter the ministry and to be placed in some type of internship, apprenticeship or care program by that church with the expectation of ultimately pastoring at another church. Barna also believes that seminaries should stress the practical side of the ministry rather than theology and related subjects. He suggests that they offer courses such as management, finance, building community, marketing personnel development, community research, ministry assessment, spiritual gifts identification, and volunteer management.

In line with the marketing model of the church, the pastor's task is to manage. Hence, the profile of a megachurch pastor is much like a CEO (Chief Executive Officer) in a business organization. Carl F. George even argues for a staff-led church rather than a board-led church. He believes that the senior pastor must therefore accept a CEO title and responsibility for the supervision of the staff and the carrying out of objectives. And he states that a senior pastor who shows reluctance in accepting this responsibility will limit the development of the church. "It's the CEO's vision casting and his or her leadership through paid staff that generally facilitates the ongoing growth of this size church. " But when everything is controlled either by a select governing board or senior pastor with his staff, who controls the controllers? Should a number-hungry church mimic the high-control management model of modern commercial enterprises? I don't believe so.

## **Sermons**

With the changing role of pastors, the emphasis on preaching has also changed. Some say that sermons, especially doctrinal sermons, "don't do it anymore. " They claim that television has made people so visually oriented they can no longer sit long enough to digest a well-thought out sermon. Jacques Ellul argues that today people prefer images above the word. He claims it has led to indifference to the question of truth. The image has become reality. Television and other visual media have increased the burden of faithful pastors, who expound the Bible in the church. They have felt the immense pressures brought to bear by our image-oriented culture. Pastors are told, "Don't preach expository sermons. Meet the needs of the people. Preach on relationships, marriage, controlling anger etc. "

Preaching has become audience-driven. It is being reduced these days to consumer and competitive marketing terms (cf. in contrast, Luke 22:24-27). The 21st century sees churches competing with popular culture on its own terms, " on the basis of their ability to stimulate the instincts of their worshippers, " turning the shepherds of the sheep into "entrepreneurs of emotional stimulation. " When the church rearranges its doctrine from an emphasis on the word to an emphasis on the image, it is in serious trouble. We need to stay with the Reformed tradition, which is in harmony with the apostles. We should never allow the sermon a secondary role in the service. The sermon is essential to the worship of the church; it is at the very core of Reformed liturgy. A pastor is a minister of the Word. His high calling is to open the Scriptures with clarity and creativity so that contemporary people will be able to hear the voice of God. The text of the Bible is the

centerpiece of a proper sermon. The apostle Paul writes to Timothy: "In the presence of God and of Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word. "(2 Tim. 4:1, 2a).

Johan D. Tangelder