

Circulation of the Saints (11)

Church of the Whatever Works

In *Habits of the Heart*, a widely-read critique of American individualism, Christopher Lasch says that the underlying presupposition of much spirituality is that of "the abstract, disembodied, free-floating, freely-choosing, contracting, decision-making, rational, autonomous individual" engaged in a quest for personal meaning. In other words, we have been given the green light to focus on ourselves, to give attention to our own personal development. When participation in a church is mentioned it is for self-realization. George Barna, a popular marketer of the church, advised his readers: "Think of your church not as a religious meeting place, but as a service agency - an entity that exists to satisfy people's needs." Since religion has been relegated to the private sphere in our society, it is not terribly surprising that many churches neglect doctrine and focus on personal and family therapy. What is the church, or better yet, who is the church? What are the doctrinal essentials of the church? What are the marks of the church? Megachurches, parachurch organizations, Christian centres, media ministries, store-front churches, and others all claim themselves as "church." And in current literature about church growth, evangelicals either avoid or evade, by-and-large, the question of the nature of the church. But in my opinion, the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) is a key issue of concern.

Church Growth at Any Cost?

Concern for church growth has led to tactics such as competition with other churches, and the overwhelming pressure on church leaders to be successful. For example, one church-growth expert judges a minister's accountability not by faithfulness but by productivity - whether "the people keep coming and giving." It appears that for some, church growth comes even at the expense of Christian education. Christian schools receive support only if it benefits church growth. In *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, Carl F. George declares, "In rare cases, not only are Christian schools and nursery day-care centers a potent growth strategy, they're also effective fund raisers for the church. But Christian day schools, with all their facility and administrative needs, tend to cause more problems than expansion."

There is also the temptation to think that powerful pulpit rhetoric, drama, visual aids, or musical excellence can, by themselves, make a church service into an encounter with God, and produce numerical results for the Kingdom. This belief is not new. It has strong roots in American culture. People like ex-baseball player-turned evangelical, Billy Sunday (1862-1935), who tore apart a chair on stage as if striking the devil, made preaching such a sensational event that it drew newspaper coverage. But Billy Sunday didn't spend too much time thinking whether his approach was biblically correct. He cared little for the niceties of theology:

"I don't know any more about theology than a jackrabbit knows about ping-pong," he would say, "but I am on the way to glory."

But Scripture is clear: An encounter with God can never be engineered or artificially produced. Not a star performer but the Holy Spirit draws people to Christ. It is the Word of God that speaks to hearts, and not the manipulative chatter of human beings. The Holy Spirit's presence is always a gift.

Today church leaders need to ask to what extent the cultural sensibilities associated with the church growth thinking reflect the objective concerns of Christian truth, and to what extent they reflect the subjective standards of this age. For example, the Willow Creek Community Church has had women elders since its founding. In a paper called *Elders' Response to the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Membership at Willow Creek*, volunteer membership coaches are told, "We ask that Participating Members of Willow Creek minimally be able to affirm with integrity the following: that they can joyfully sit under the teaching of women teachers...that they can joyfully submit to the leadership of women in various leadership positions at Willow Creek." The January 1996 statement on sex roles states that Willow Creek is committed to "encourage the use of translations of Scripture that accurately portrays God's will that His church be an inclusive community." What if one does not agree that women should have a leadership position at Willow Creek? Laurie Pederson, one of the first women elders at Willow Creek, said, "We don't say that all Christians have to agree with us. We just think that if you can't embrace this teaching, practically speaking, you'd probably be happier at some other church."

The Church is Exclusive

The church is not a club one can leave or join at will. It is not a society of due paying members. It is not a group of seekers for truth. The church is that place where God's glory resides and where God dwells with His people. It is primarily a worshipping community - the new covenant people called to proclaim and enact the wonderful deeds of its Saviour to the praise of the Father. The church is called the temple in which all are living stones in Christ Jesus (2 Cor.6:16; Eph. 2:21f). The church is also described as a family. Dr. N.T. Wright says that for the early Christians, "from baptism onwards, one's basic family consisted of fellow-Christians. The fact of widespread persecution, regarded by both pagans and Christians as the normal state of affairs within a century of the beginnings of Christianity, is powerful evidence of the sort of thing Christianity was, and was perceived to be. It was a new family, a third 'race,' neither Jew nor Gentile but 'in Christ.' And Calvin called the church a mother, "there is no other entrance into life, save as [the church] may conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us from her breasts, and embrace us in loving care to the end."

Discipline

In our present environment churches are so concerned about gaining converts, their doors are so wide open, that they are abandoning the responsibility to use preaching and discipline - the keys of the kingdom, to close them. And when church membership is considered as only an option, it makes the coming and going as one pleases all the

easier. However, when the church is so concerned with making room for everyone, not excluding anyone, the distinction between the world and the church is lost. It becomes hard to distinguish between those who belong to God's covenant people and those who are seekers.

Church membership has its privileges and responsibilities. That's why discipline is an essential function of the church. In the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's 31, Question 83 asks, "What are the keys of the kingdom? The answer is, "The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers." Church discipline is divinely mandated. It is for the preservation of the unity of the faith, for education in the faith, and for the building up of a *living* community, and also as an antidote for a congregation threatened by error.

Sacraments

Since the church is exclusive, the sacraments are also exclusive. The sacraments are for God's people only. The Heidelberg Catechism says that the Holy Spirit produces faith by means of preaching and confirms it by means of the sacraments (Lord's Day 25). They function as signs and seals of the covenant, that is, they confirm the believers in the promises of God. They are means to nurturing faith. That's why unbelievers must not take part.

Although in the Reformed churches we readily speak about the importance of the sacrament in the life of the church, I wonder how they function in our personal walk with the Lord. For example, the apostolic churches reveal an awareness of baptism rarely seen in churches today. How many rejoice in their baptism? I fear that baptism occupies a fairly marginal niche in the teaching programs and hence the corporate mind of many a Reformed congregation.

The Lord's Supper as a sacrament is not considered an essential aspect of Christian worship by those concerned with church growth.

But our Lord commands His Church to celebrate the Lord's Supper until He comes again in glory (I Cor. 11:26). The Lord's Supper is for believers only. The Heidelberg Catechism asks, "Who are to come to the Lord's Supper?" The answer is: "Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life." (Q.A. 81) At the Lord's table we meet as a covenant community. The community character of worship is particularly emphasized in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Johan D. Tangelder