

Circulation of the Saints (12)

The Comfortable pew; the forgotten Cross

Why do churches adopt management models and practices of business life? Why do they resort to gimmicks, entertainment, and techniques instead of practicing an "unadulterated handling of the Word of God?" Why do they dumb down worship to attract seekers?

Times have changed. In the past, Reformed worship was uniform and austere. In *The Grace That Shaped My Life*, Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1932-) describes the worship service of his youth in the Christian Reformed Church in Bigelow, Minnesota. He says that they dressed up for the Lord's Day, and entered the church well in advance of the beginning of the service to collect in silence, "silence so intense it could be touched." Each service included psalms, often sung to the Genevan tunes.

The catechism was faithfully preached. Wolterstorff said, "If the aesthetic of this liturgy was simplicity, sobriety and measure, what was its religious genius? The only word I have now, to capture how it felt then, is sacramental; it felt profoundly sacramental. One went to church to meet God; and in the meeting, God acted, especially spoke. The language of 'presence' will not do. God was more than present; God spoke, and in the sacrament, 'nourished and refreshed us,' here and now sealing his promise to unite us with Christ."

Theology of the Cross

One of the great wants of contemporary North American culture is for ease, comfort, the total absence of suffering. The focus on the needs of the self seems to characterize many churches. This trend may be highly successful, but its cost is high. I wonder whether Pierre Berton's *Comfortable Pew* (1965), which critiqued the Anglican Church, can also describe today's seeker and megachurch services, and perhaps much of evangelicalism? I am thinking of worship services that avoid the problems of evil, suffering and pain, which merely attempt to cover them up with the singing of "happy songs" and "upbeat" happiness. Do we move too quickly from the darkness of Good Friday to the light of Easter? Do we try to skip the cross while wanting a crown? The apostle Paul's saying, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), is not very fashionable in our age. Os Guinness, a critic of megachurches, says that when megachurch pastors use the "market" approach to meet seeker's needs, their preaching omits key components. He notes that the hard sayings of Jesus are gone. "Gone is teaching on sin, self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, judgment, hell." He believes that marketing is bringing evangelicalism perilously close to the liberalism criticized earlier by Richard Niebuhr as "a God without wrath [bringing] men without sin into a Kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."

The Christian faith should neither be turned into a comfortable pew nor into a cure for all ills, as much as it does give life, hope, and purpose. Instead we need to emphasize the cost of discipleship, the absolute claim of God over our entire life, and our belonging to an alternative culture shaped by the Kingdom of God. We should hear about the realities of our broken world; a world on the run from God. The church's model is the crucified Lord, the suffering servant, and the one whose power is in the weakness of the cross. What Christians need is not a message that they can escape suffering and pain, but that there is purpose in hardship and hope for the future. The truth of God's ultimate victory over pain, sin and death when the Lord returns in glory must also be heard.

Christians should expect to suffer, to be misunderstood, to be reviled, to be persecuted for righteousness' sake as a norm rather than as an exception. Our Lord said, "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). He also said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10). This beatitude is a concise summary of the way of the Cross. The apostle Paul said that Christians can even "boast" in their suffering, for they know that it produces perseverance, then character, and then a hope that will not disappoint (Rom. 5:3-5). There is no room for triumphalism in the church. The cross was an instrument of death. The church triumphs by suffering with Christ. Christ's kingdom cannot be gained by prestige or power or techniques. The apostle Paul repeatedly tells us that Christ's church shares in the sufferings of its head (Phil 3:10). As Jesus suffered and endured the shame of the cross, so will Christ's people endure the shame heaped upon them by an unbelieving world (2 Cor. 1:3-11). We should return to the theology of the cross. The Gospel faithfully preached and lived has never been popular. The scandal of the cross has always been a stumbling block and an offence. But a theology of the cross will encourage believers to take up their cross in self-negation. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, eight years before the Nazis hanged him.

The Alternative Community

With the cross in mind, we turn our backs on the corporate, market-driven view of the church and return to the practice of the church as a communion of saints. The Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What do you understand by 'the communion of saints'?" The answer, "First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it his duty to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members" (L.D. 21: Q.A.55). A church which practices the communion of saints will grow in spiritual depth and openness to others. Martin Luther noted that as the priesthood of believers we mediate God's care to other Christians and to all humanity. It reminds us that the fundamental Christian witness is not that of the isolated individual but that of the church.

Caring for others leads from individualism to community. An experience of community is needed more than ever in our Western society. Quentin J. Schultze points out that the individual is "feeling increasingly isolated and is searching for new ways to understand

and experience meaningful togetherness." Our society suffers from a lack of cohesion and a loss of meaningful connectness. We witness social instability, increase in violence, drug abuse, deviant behaviour, pessimism, fear of the future. Even many modern families contribute to the isolation of the individual. They often vegetate in front of the tube - and frequently in separate rooms with unshared program choices. One consequence is social exclusion and a crisis of identity.

The antidote to the unbridled spirit of individualism is the Church as the living body of believers. Taking the church seriously is decidedly counter-cultural. In the context of the church as a community, our spirituality is formed. This is why the famous statement of Cyprian, "You cannot have God as your Father without the church as your mother," has been affirmed throughout history. But the root problem we face is the lack of genuine community in our churches. Many Christians feel they are waging a solitary battle. Sadly, loneliness is every bit as common among Christians as among those outside of the church. We need a Christ focussed community that supports and nurtures us. In this community we reflect on meaty doctrines, the creeds and the confessions. We forgive one another, exercise patience, memorize Scripture, seek intimacy with God, the beauty of holiness, earnest repentance, and lament over sin. In this community there is room for the old and the young. We seem to forget this in our youth-oriented culture. But the church cannot be the church without the elderly. Young people in the church community are learning the rules and values of the adults with whom they interact. The elderly pass on their wisdom and perspectives to the younger generation. This practice of interdependence is probably best expressed in Paul's image of the fellowship in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12: 14-26) This does not mean that we will be free from generational conflict and misunderstanding.

Younger people may see the elderly as too rigid, too set in their ways, and the seniors may think that the young show a lack of regard for the community. But it is in this fellowship of doing good to each other, reconciling ourselves with each other, loving each other, sacrificially assuring and building up each other to grow in community that the older and younger generation of believers can have meaning and hope. This community does NOT embrace relativism, same- sex marriage, abortion, racism, social injustice, pornography, drugs, and alcoholism. Furthermore, it does not pay attention to social distinctions. We are all equal at the foot of the cross. It is no accident that pagan authors who from the latter half of the second century began to attack the church by emphasizing the new religion's openness toward humble folk and slaves. They made much of the Christian's lack of regard for social distinctions in the internal affairs of the congregations. Marva Dawn points out that the church should be an alternative society - not possessed by possessions, not consumed by consumerism, but alive to the Gospel and generous in sharing it by being Church.

Johan D. Tangelder