

Circulation of the Saints (Conclusion)

Conclusion of the matter

Canada is no longer a nation of churchgoers. Fewer attend church on a regular basis, now down to 19%. However, interest in spirituality is on the increase. *Time Magazine* [Nov.24,2003] observes, "Why have so many of those born into a particular faith dropped out? There are a host of reasons - busier lives, a more materialistic society, media that make light of religious values." An Evangelical Fellowship of Canada [E.F.C] sponsored survey, taken between September 23rd and October 12th, 2003, revealed that 19% of Canadians (12% Protestant and 7% Catholics) are evangelicals. It also shows that the number of evangelicals is on the rise. But the church doesn't seem to have an important role in their faith life. The survey shows that while Evangelicals are regular church attenders themselves, they tend not to insist on church attendance as an indicator whether or not a person is a good Christian. But what are the implications for the body of Christ, which as the term itself suggests, is contrary to the isolation of believers? Bruce J. Clemenger notes, "The data indicates that our efforts at evangelism have been successful. Perhaps our weakness has been discipleship and the importance of living out our faith in word and deed as part of the community of believers."

Evangelicals tend to point to megachurches as proof of evangelical church growth. But George Barna points out that when numerical growth occurs, it usually transpires because adults leave one congregation for another. The unchurched adults don't change their pattern of behaviour. They won't return to a house of worship. Furthermore, exciting testimonies of megachurches growing by leaps and bounds are fantasies to which the average pastor in a small congregation can scarcely relate. His attention is on ministering to his flock and encouraging them to live out their Christian lives in the public square.

The challenge for evangelical leaders is to take a hard look at the devastation caused by individualism and relativism, also in their churches. They should also ask to what extent the church growth movement has embraced certain cultural forms for the sake of expedience and numbers.

Spirit of Discernment

In the current worship wars and controversies about church growth and megachurches the church needs a spirit of godly discernment. In *Worship Seeking Understanding*, John D. Witvliet points out that discernment helps us learn the difference between evangelistic zeal and personal aggrandizement, between aesthetic critiques that are spiritually astute and those that are simply pretentious, between theological arguments that truly defend the Gospel and those used to protect somebody's turf. He rightly says that many aspects of worship today require a discerning spirit, but few are as theologically significant as the role of the Holy Spirit in worship.

The Holy Spirit

Pentecostals and charismatics don't have "a corner" on the Holy Spirit. Hughes Oliphant Old, a Reformed theologian, contends, "If there is one doctrine which is at the heart of Reformed worship it is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit." Some of the finest works on the Holy Spirit were written by Calvinists. A number of Calvin scholars, including B.B. Warfield, have called John Calvin nothing less than "a theologian of the Holy Spirit." Calvin said that the Spirit lifts us into the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. The Spirit illumines our hearts as we hear God's Word proclaimed. The Spirit inspires our praise and prayers. In Calvin's words, "That the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart, and composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of the Lord." We must recover Calvin's emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in worship services, while keeping in mind that the Spirit's presence is always a gift. It can never be engineered or produced. As the 1997 CRC study report *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture* makes clear: "We shouldn't link the Holy Spirit with less planning or less formality. The Holy Spirit can be powerfully present in a very highly structured service and can be absent in a service with little structure. Beyond questions of style and formality, the question always before us is this: does this act of worship bring praise to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit?"

Education

Recent studies and surveys paint a rather gloomy picture of modern evangelicalism. Many church attenders scarcely know the basic tenets of their faith and at best are only moderately committed to building a community of believers who are devoted to serving Christ with passion. One writer, who complained about Biblical illiteracy in churches, noted that for most people sitting in the church on a given morning, the pastor knows that his Scripture reading and references will be the only ones to which they will be exposed during the week. In *World Magazine* (Febr. 7, 2004) Gene Edward Veith claims that only half of America's ministers hold to a biblical worldview, but even many who do, aren't passing it on to their congregations. He charges that the sheep are hungry and are not fed. Many have already starved to death. George Barna discovered that only 9 percent of all born-again adults actually possess a biblical worldview as the basis of which they would make day-to-day decisions - moral decisions, financial decisions, relational decisions. But as long as church growth is judged by numbers rather than transformed minds and lives, we should not be surprised that the behaviour of many reportedly born-again Christians is not much different from unbelievers.

Instead of solid expository preaching many ministers appear to present only "adult forums" and sermons that merely "share opinions" on various issues rather than offer a deep exposition of Scripture to lay the basis for genuine Christian thinking. And rather than explaining the contents of the faith to the congregation and inviting newcomers to learn its meaning, many churches shy away from it for fear that newcomers won't

understand. But the Christian faith is not always easily understood. It is not always easy to be a follower of the Lord.

Instead of dumbing down worship service and the content of the Gospel, we should work on good educational programs. Every church that gathers for worship could be like the people of Berea, who searched the Scriptures to confirm everything the apostle Paul said to make sure it was the truth (Acts 17:10-12). Each congregation is part of the constant process of preserving the faith from one generation to the next. Our lives are touched by those who lived centuries ago. I suggest that our model should be the early church, which existed in a pagan environment very much like ours. The Church taught doctrine, had loving fellowship, and celebrated the sacraments. There was no dumbing down of worship, or making the Gospel palatable for the pagans. The Church was very careful to invite, welcome, teach, and instruct, so that newcomers were eager to learn and then be admitted to worship.

Today, more than ever, we must root ourselves and our children in the Biblical worldview, its morals and values, so that we become equipped with skills for making wise choices about the media, and so on. Furthermore, we must teach the meaning of what we do in our worship services, why we sing as a congregation, why a distinct order of worship, and have a period of silence before the service rather than have a band perform or listen to canned music. We can teach all this through Sunday school classes, catechism instruction, new membership classes and so on. Teaching may be unglamorous work but commanded by Scripture (Ps. 78:1-6).

Missions and Worship

Our Lord commissioned the church to preach the Gospel (Matt. 28:19f). This mission mandate is broader than support for a foreign missionary through the church budget. It involves outreach in our immediate community where we live and work. Jesus gave no special commission for overseas missions. He gave only one commission. The words simply say what Jesus expects His followers to do. We cannot ascribe glory to the Lord without wanting our neighbours to worship Him too. Genuine worship leads to missions. At the conclusion the worship service, the congregation is blessed and sent forth to glorify God in all of life. Refreshed by the bread of life and renewed in their service as God's people, they are sent forth to serve their Master. This Word and deed ministry is neither glamorous nor obsessed with numbers. In obedience to the Great Commission, Christians introduced unbelievers to the Gospel, brought an end to slavery, inspired the first hospitals, and founded institutions of learning.

The Pilgrim Church.

As I conclude the series "the circulation of the saints," I am reminded of the pilgrim nature of the church, the body of Christ. Christians cannot escape the world. We, who are travelling to the New Jerusalem, are called to faithfully serve our Lord. It will put us out of step with our society and its postmodern culture. But there will always be a church. Our Lord promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against her. When He

returns, He will gather in that great multitude of saints that no one can number. To God be the glory!

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