

The Cyberchurch, the Megachurch & the Myth of New Ways of 'Doing Church'

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.
(Hebrews 10:24-5) NKJV

'We need to embrace new ways of *doing church*' is fast becoming the call coming across the modern church. In the vanguard of those calling for the adoption of these 'new ways' have been numerous leaders from within the broader evangelical community. So successful have they been in attracting numbers to their 'modernised' meetings that their methods have even found ways into the mainstream denominations.

Doing church 'my way'

On a microscale, where the members of Ponds Forge in Sheffield, England, a church within the Anglican Communion, dutifully stripped away years of 'churchy trappings' and created its now infamous 'Nine O'Clock Service', installing disco lights inviting its (surprise, surprise) predominantly young membership to gyrate 'worshipfully' to the strains of U2 et al, all appeared well for a while. The 'new way' seemed to be working very well to outside church commentators. Church commentators who had had their 'reservations' were duly praising of Ponds Forge's 'success'. But when the allegations of a cult-like leadership demanding total obedience from 'followers' and growing claims of sexual and financial abuse were made by former members the national newspapers soon put paid to the 'new way' by exposing it for the fraud it plainly was¹.

On a macroscale, Pentecostalism spawned the charismatic movement which was better able to carry the unbiblical second baptism theology of its parent movement into the more liberal denominations. Many Pentecostal leaders, feeling the constraints of a higher degree of biblicism by those in their movement, jumped ship entirely. They abandoned 'old-style Pentecostalism' altogether, developing a 'name-it-and-claim it' philosophy and, by doing so, founding the most successful money-spinning 'Christian' operation of all time – the Word-Faith movement.

In recent decades the megachurch (almost exclusively a phenomenon limited to semi-suburban city areas) became the vogue, with many adopting a 'seeker-sensitive' approach to their main Sunday service of worship. Their obfuscation of the message of personal sin in favour of the more non-confrontational 'Jesus loves you' certainly attracted more people through the door, but at the expense of properly preaching the law to them as of *first* importance *and* properly 'feeding' the already committed church member².

One only has to read the facts and figures provided by Peter Brierley's Christian Research Association (formerly MARC Europe) in the UK and George Barna's US-based research group to know that these new ways of doing church have been highly successful – in terms of arresting the overall decline, at least. In terms of holiness, faithfulness and captivity to God's written Word, however, the situation is somewhat different, as these pages have borne testimony over the past five years.³

Whatever one may think of the decline of the more established denominations, let us not forget one thing – the new-style churches have still to pass the same test of longevity. At least with the decline of Anglicanism, Methodism, the Baptist movement and so on, it has been more of a 'slow strangulation', the result of neglect of God's Word and the consequent

disintegration of church order. If we are right in this assessment that the new 'doers of church' are more blatantly unbiblical in their approach, then we may expect their 'destruction' to be much swifter in due course.

So what next? To the innovations among the 'new ways' we must apparently add the coming cyberchurch – a 'virtual' church which will largely exist on-line in cyberspace via the Internet. The cyberchurch, claim its proponents, provides the ultimate opportunity for the church of tomorrow.

What is the cyberchurch?

The advent and impact of the Internet is undoubtedly on a par with the invention of the printing press and not the arrival of television or radio. It has an immediate global reach which is able to facilitate the exchange of large amounts of information as nothing before. But it is also an interactive medium which allows us to shop, research, find old friends anywhere in the world, even attend live concerts – all without setting foot outside our homes. So why not 'attend church' this way too?

The cyberchurch, and the possibilities it brings with it for 'global fellowship', is enthusing many evangelical leaders today as perhaps the ultimate way in which to 'come together' as a church in the twenty-first century. And make no mistake; the cyberchurch is indeed going to set the modern church alight with yet another success story. Key in the word 'cyberchurch' on your Internet 'search engine' today and you will see that the first of the world's on-line churches is already up and running. Extraordinary global growth is predicted for the cyberchurch and, in due course, Messrs Brierley and Barna will duly pronounce it the 'unparalleled phenomenon of the church age'. Leaders still 'doing church' the old-fashioned way will soon feel the 'hot breath' of voices on their necks demanding conformity.

There is little question that in terms of its size the coming cyberchurch is going to be a 'big player' in the church and religious stakes generally. A recent US study reports one in four adult American Internet users already 'seek out' their religious experiences and religious information on-line. Up from 2 million last year, 3 million Americans now seek out spiritual or religious information and/or experience on-line, making it more popular than any other on-line activity⁴.

In 1998 pollster and sociologist George Barna was the first to predict the emergence of the cyberchurch. Barna predicted that its congregation of millions 'will never travel physically to a church, but will instead roam the Internet in search of spiritual experiences.' Barna went on to predict that the majority of former churchgoers 'will become completely isolated from the 'traditional church format'. His studies led him to anticipate that between 10 and 20 percent of the 'faith-based population' will be reliant upon the Internet for their religious input by as soon as 2010.

In his on-line article 'The Cyberchurch Is Coming', Barna cites 'The discomfort of today's church leaders with the cyberchurch' as paralleling the same discomfort church leaders felt when Willow Creek inaugurated its 'seeker church' in the late 70s and 80s. Anyone familiar with Barna's statistical announcements will have noted that he is a highly opinionated sociologist. The undisguised enthusiasm Barna has for the coming cyberchurch, not least in his book *The Second Coming of the Church*, is plain enough. Barna believes it is a good thing that 'some of the new forms of church allow for greater diversity of audience and faith expression'. Though acknowledging that there will be virtually no scope for 'spiritual accountability' and that it will 'open the door for rampant theological heresy' (as if we did not already have enough!) his enthusiasm is undimmed. 'The biggest question facing current Christian leaders is not how to stop the development of the new forms of church...rather, the challenge is to determine how to ensure that those forms are tuned in to the foundational theology and principles that reflect the basis of the existing church.'

It is perfectly apparent that Barna is prone to major assumptions and presumptions. For a start, Barna assumes that Willow Creek's 'seeker church' is a

biblically-rooted way of 'doing church'. We have no doubt that the theology behind the 'seeker-sensitive' service, with its 'guiltless good news' message⁵, has been revealed to be anything but biblical and acceptable. Barna is highly impressed by churches which play the numbers game. We must remember that Mr Barna is a statistician however, and that numbers are his business. In common with many modern evangelical leaders, nowhere does Barna postulate that certain media forms are superior to others when it comes to the propagation of the gospel. Television, for instance, has proven a thoroughly inadequate medium for the gospel message, denying true debate with its thirty-second sound bites, and being geared almost exclusively to entertainment, even in how it presents the very worst news items. The 'success' of the money-spinning TV evangelist merely confirms the point that, in reality, entertainment is the key.

Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* shows just how the medium of television is severely limited when it comes to serious debate. Postman says, 'On television discourse is conducted largely through visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us a conversation in images, not words...television demands a different kind of content from other media. You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content.'⁶ It is the same with the uniqueness of Christ's message of the gospel.

Barna is not alone in his disparaging of those who may be less enthusiastic than he over the 'opportunities' presented by the cyberchurch. Following Barna's lead, Andrew Careaga, in his article 'Embracing the Cyberchurch', identifies six issues which the 'traditional church' needs to consider if it is to 'embrace' the new culture of the cyberchurch. Careaga too assumes a pragmatic approach by noting that the Internet is:

- Interactive, not passive
- Networked, not hierarchical
- Postmodern, not modern
- Questioning, not accepting
- Collaborative, not isolationist
- Asynchronous, not time-bound

We have no time here to go into each of these separate arguments. Suffice it to note the loaded language in each of the above headings when comparing the possibilities of the Internet with – with what he does not say; but the strong implication is 'with traditional church'. He invites us to note through the adjectives employed before the comma (see above) how the Internet – and the cyberchurch thereby? – can be a better, more 'positive' medium for the gospel than is the 'traditional church', as exemplified by the 'negative' adjectives employed after the comma (see above).

We might easily characterize Careaga's negative view of two thousand years of 'traditional church' (using his own order as above) as marked by: docility, authoritarianism, irrelevance, docility again, tunnel-vision, limitation. Not a very edifying picture of two thousand years of Christ's reign through his church.

Megachurches are already embracing the cyberchurch

Already some of the world's megachurches are dipping their toes into the culture of cyberchurch. David Yonggi-Cho's 750,000-member Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, and Rick Warren's 15,000-member Saddleback Valley Community Church in the USA agree that the Internet is the 'next generation strategy' for the church. The two pastors met in California in the summer of 2001 and concluded there was a 'need to stop building churches' and use the money for world mission. What they meant by 'world mission' however is not what previous generations meant by it. They mean to utilise cyberspace through which they may teach and preach their own distinctive brand of 'Christianity'. In a report from *Religion Today*, Cho is quoted as telling his church's young people: 'Don't come to church, just stay at home and get your teaching through the

Internet⁷. Cho's church already runs live services over the Internet on Sunday and Wednesday evenings. In the same report Cho insists he now wants a 'total cyberspace ministry' and to develop 'world-wide fellowship and services'.

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Church*, says his church is already experimenting with live Internet services and has set up a 'GroupNet' which helps groups stay connected to each other⁸.

With a study showing that 100,000 Protestant churches are already ministering through the Web (not, of course, through the provision of on-line church services), George Barna now estimates as many as 50 million individuals may already be relying solely upon the Internet for all of their faith-based experiences.⁹

Most recently, Bill Hybels' massive Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, which has pioneered the 'seeker sensitive' approach to service, has announced a parallel development. Though not going down the Internet path itself as yet, it has announced new church arrangements which suggest the same kind of thinking about church. Willow Creek now attracts over 17,000 people to its six weekend services. It plans to reach more – by setting up satellite churches around its home base Chicago area. Being aware of the potential criticism that people will 'just turn up, watch a screen and go home', the Willow Creek team emphasized that each satellite church will also have its *own* pastor, music and ministries tailored to its own location¹⁰. But if they are going to have 'their own minister', one wonders why there is a need to remain *centralized* at all? Why not simply church-plant and allow the 'local minister' to minister, locally following the biblical pattern?

The problem is not that there is anything innately wrong with the use of 'overspill' or 'satellite' facilities as churches grow (if only this *were* our church problem!). The Willow Creek pattern is very different however. While TV screens and/or radio links may assist churches needing overspill facilities, but which still conduct teaching, the breaking of bread, prayer and everything else in communal fellowship, what Willow Creek propose is something quite different. How are Willow Creek members to break bread around a 'common' table? How are communion participants to know each other's prayer needs? And how can a 'remote' minister teach other than an impersonal public platform, minister to those 'in his care' and administer discipline evenly in his congregation? Most of all, how will they be obeying the practical and plain biblical injunction to 'assemble ourselves together'? Why not simply church-plant new congregations? Why insist on maintaining this *centralized* approach? Or could it be that the very success of the megachurch formula is far more dependent upon the cult of individual personalities than has thus far been acknowledged? We will soon have a much better idea about this as the first generation of megachurch leaders shuffle off their mortal coil, passing their mantle to the next generation of leaders.

In all of this it is easy to see how young and vulnerable Christians, used only to glimpses of their megachurch heroes and buying their 'How You Can Do It Too' videos, may 'join' their online congregations in the privacy of their own homes.

So why is the very concept of a cyberchurch a spiritual 'dead duck'?

What are the rest of us as ministers and church members to make of the coming cyberchurch and the debate it will foster? Will we be as gullible and wowed by the cyberchurch's numerical successes as we have been by that of successive waves of other 'new way' church-doers? Those who offer 'Supernatural activity – here tonight at 7.30pm!' Or the 'Get healed today' claimants? The 'Name it - it's yours!' teachers? Or the 'Come and feel good about yourself' ear-ticklers? Because we can all 'do church' in a 'new' and 'freer' way, should we desire larger congregations, worldly acceptance and praise for *our* achievements. But 'free worship' has always been a contradiction in terms, because worship, like any other area of godliness, is governed by biblical teaching, not the breadth of our

human imaginations. Many churches have desired to be 'freer' from constraint, even biblical constraint. But ours is the first generation of Christians to abandon the biblical way of doing church on the scale that it has already done.

Yet, it is necessary to remember that Christ stunned the fashionable, popular church at Sardis by revealing to it 'you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead' (Revelation 3:1). We need to be exceedingly careful in how we use our spiritual judgment. A sense of belonging, warmth, acceptance, liveliness and that goal of numerical success is the province of the cult as much as of the church. How else do we think the cults attract so many individuals? What distinguishes a Christian church from all else is its obedience to Christ's command in its church life and the life of each church member. Sardis only had the appearance of success as the world adjudges success. It was a 'great place to be' but faithful it was not. We are called not to 'judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment' (John 7:24). And it is obedience to Christ's commands alone that matters (John 14:15; 21; 23; 24). And it is his commands which must govern our approach to 'doing church'.

The marks of a true church

The Reformed faith, drawing upon the teachings of Scripture alone and in it concurring with the teaching of the church fathers, has always pointed to two distinct marks of a church of Christ:

1. *The true proclamation of the Word of God* (John 8:31,47; Galatians 1:8-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4; 1 John 4:1-3).
2. *The right administration of the sacraments* (1 Corinthians 10:14 - 17,21; 1 Corinthians 11:23-30).

To this many Reformed theologians have added a third:

3. *The faithful exercise of church discipline* (Matthew 18:17; Acts 20:28-31; Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

Dr Robert Reymond in his *A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith* says, 'It is quite easy to document the significance of these marks for the Reformers and their churches from the national creeds they wrote'. The Confessions of the Protestant Faith also labour to reveal what it is that makes a church a church according to Scripture. To the degree that a church lacks one of these marks it calls into question its status as a church of Christ.

What becomes immediately apparent for our purpose, then, is that the cyberchurch can *never* constitute a 'gathering of ourselves together' and faithfully fulfil the biblical demand to *continue* to assemble in *genuine* fellowship. How can it possibly perform marks 2 and 3 above faithfully unless it is a local church context where people live and work together? People who know each other's needs, pray for each other by name, love each other? Whenever the Bible speaks of 'doing church', it is *always* in the context of people who learn and hold 'the apostles doctrine' in common (Acts 2:42 - mark 1), who share fellowship by breaking bread around a common Table (vs.44 - mark 2) and who 'continued daily with one accord', thus eliminating indiscipline in the church (vs.46 - mark 3). Neither does it stop there. Hedge all of this round with the apostle Paul's instructions concerning the nature of public worship or 'doing church' in his final letters - those in 1 Timothy and Titus especially - and we begin to see the sheer folly of attempting to 'do cyberchurch'.

The wisdom in meeting together in *local* groups should never be underestimated. How can we pray for those in our local fellowship if we do not mix with them socially too? How can we genuinely love those in our fellowship if their concerns are not ours too? Is there not something truly special about local fellowship? Indeed the very concept of the megachurch itself now comes into focus. Even those who run them note how easy it is for individuals to 'get lost' in their massive congregations. Ray Pritchard, pastor of Calvary Chapel Memorial

Church megachurch in Oak Park, Illinois says, 'It's very easy in a larger congregation for people to get lost. In fact, our church is a great place to come if you want to get lost.' He adds, 'We move people in and out quickly. We have 60-70 different ministries that people can get involved with. It's easy to lose track of individual faces.' Is this how Christ and the Scriptures see the NT church of God? Is frantic activity and a church leadership which has no chance of even learning the names of their members, much less minister to them, a 'successful church'?

If this, then, reflects the true nature of the megachurch, which meets together in one place, what then of the 'super-megachurch' – the on-line cyberchurch? How can it ever hope to fulfil the God-given commands that teach us *how* to 'do Christian church'? We shall watch its rise. We know even now of its doomed end.

Conclusion

Christ told us there would always be 'wars and rumours of wars'. Equally, there will always be the 'latest successful church phenomenon' and rumours of it. The would-be high-flying church, which has been adopting the time-honoured methods of preaching new revelation and practising signs and wonders (second-century Montanist, nineteenth-century Irvingite and twentieth-century Pentecostal churches), cheap grace (Alpha, seeker-sensitive and many charismatic churches) or self-help philosophies (Word-Faith, name-it-and-claim-it churches), to draw the greedy, the gullible as well as the downright deceived, is now also playing the 'let's do global church' card. But such a church will not retain the loyalty of one who listens to God's Word, because God does not call his people to a church which practises unrighteousness.

The more biblically minded, however, already know that in truth there is *no* new way to 'do church'. For us it is sufficient to obey Christ (or do we believe we know better than him?) by continuing to assemble together in worshipful awe of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to learn and live the apostles' doctrine, to break bread and drink wine, pray together, to fellowship and genuinely love each other – just as he has loved us.

¹ For the full story of the Ponds Forge's 'Nine O'Clock Service' read Roland Howard's *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service: a cult within the church?* (Mowbray Publications, 1996). Though we are grateful to Howard for his diligent research it quickly becomes apparent that though the author provides evidence for abuse right from the start he himself perceives the venture as a brave experiment that went wrong, as 'a church reaching out intelligently to a "godless generation", bringing them Christianity with a passion for, ...their issues' (taken from the second paragraph of Howard's introduction). By 'their issues' he means poverty, racism, sexuality etc. that the author appears to believe are not on the agenda of other churches at all.

The belief that any church project corrupted *at its roots* by the absence of the requisite 'practice of righteousness' (1 John 3:7) and that the leadership (see James 3:1) were just as 'godless' as those they were reaching out to, is almost completely lost on Howard.

² The chief purpose of the main weekly service is *not* evangelism. The main weekly business of any church is the assembling together of believers (though unbelievers are of course invited to observe) to worship God and be 'fed' by him, as he demands and as only believers can.

³ A recent study among membership provides a searing insight into the beliefs of the average megachurch member. The FACT study (reported on-line by *Religion Today* 2.1.02) found a staggering 88% placed a 'high reliance on the authority of the Bible'. This augurs well...until we find what this 'theory' means in 'practice'. Of the same group *only* 8% believe that doctrine and the historic creeds are of anything other than 'of small importance'. Here is the modern evangelical problem in a nutshell: the theory of Christian and biblical *confession* breaks down when it comes to Christian and biblical *practice* (which doctrine and the confessions, of course, guide and dictate).

⁴ All of the George Barna quotes and statistics mentioned here can be found at Barna Research Online at www.barna.org

⁵ See US pastor and broadcaster Don Matzat's excellent 'Guiltless good news: the deformed theology of seeker-sensitivity' *CRN Journal* issue 5 (Spring 1999), pp 8-10.

⁶ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, (Reading: Methuen, re-printed 1997), p. 7.

⁷ ‘Online Churches – the Wave of the Future?’ taken from the *Religion Today* on-line news service, July 24, 2001.

⁸ Taken from an interview with Warren which appears in *Rick Warrens’ Ministry Toolbox*, issue dated July 25, 2001.

⁹ George Barna, taken from ‘More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences’, Barna Research Online, May 21, 2001.

¹⁰ ‘Study Shines Spotlight on Megachurches’ by Janet Chismar, editor of *Religion Today* on-line news service, November 13, 2001.

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