

## The Church of the Highest Common Denominator

by Kim Riddlebarger

Perhaps you, too, have noticed. The American church world is changing. I don't know if the religion section of your local newspaper is like the one in our neighborhood. But even on a quick reading, one thing is abundantly clear. Denominations are out. "Fellowships" are in. Traditional names for churches are out. Trendy names are in. Oh, there are a few "United Methodist Church of . . .", "First Presbyterian Church of . . .", "Messiah Lutheran Church," but their numbers are dwindling. There are more and more "community churches" listed in my area with no denominational affiliation mentioned anywhere in connection with the church.

Many new churches — even some reconstituted old ones—now go by the name of the upscale housing developments where they are located. "Stonebridge Christian Fellowship" meets in a high-tech office portion of a local industrial center, within eyesight of the two-year old Stonebridge housing tract. I am sure Stonebridge Christian Fellowship is typical of such places in your community as well. But from the name and the looks of the place, I know more about the demographics of the congregation than I do about the doctrine they believe, if any.

Another indicator of the changing state of the American church becomes apparent when looking at the sermon topics advertised for these same local churches. "How to Have a Happy Marriage." "God Allows U-Turns." "Love Conquers All." A generation or so ago, it was not uncommon for a church to advertise a doctrinal series, or feature some denomination distinctive, like a bible prophecy conference. Some churches even dared preach on such things as why their church was right and why everyone else was wrong. Some emphasized missions or community outreach. Then, there were the "hellfire and brimstone churches," or the "Spirit-filled" churches with weekly revivals. There are probably one or two of these in your community, but I'll bet there are not as many as there used to be.

One local church located next to my high school—and quite large, I may add—was known for its

narrow-minded doctrinal positions. As a church in the Campbellite tradition, we all knew that this church taught that you must be baptized by them in order to be saved. But nearly thirty years later, that same church now sends slick monthly mailings to my house featuring a Saturday evening "postmodern service" which begins at 6:33 PM. What is a postmodern service? Why 6:33 PM? Instead of classes in restorationist theology (typical of Churches of Christ or Christian Churches a generation ago), this church now has youth groups for all ages (trips to skateboard parks and the like), classes on parenting and addiction recovery, and workshops for divorced people. Not a word is mentioned anywhere in their mailing about doctrine. Not a word is said about their denomination affiliation.

What has happened over the last thirty years? Such churches have become "churches of the lowest common denominator." Like water running downhill, they have taken the line of least resistance. They settle for the lowest point so as to be most attractive to all. Sadly, all these same churches now look alike and sound alike. They are no longer divided by doctrine or their histories. The only real difference among them is in the programs they offer.

For a number of years now, various church leaders in my neck of the woods (Orange County, CA) have told us that in order for churches to grow and recover their vitality, they needed to be more cognizant of contemporary culture. These leaders also told us that we needed to become more adept at speaking to people in ways which are meaningful to them. So far so good. But how did this stress on being "contemporary" work itself out in practice? The church I pastor—Christ Reformed Church (URC)—is within eyesight of Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral. Schuller, you may recall, built his church by going throughout the local community and asking people why they didn't go to church. The follow-up question had to do with what a church could do to get them to go. Well, it was not long

before young Schuller bought a local drive-in and was preaching to people who stayed in their automobiles hooked up to the church service through the clunky drive-in speaker hanging from the car window. Going to church in their “jammies” without getting out of their cars, apparently, must have been at the top of many a person's church wish list.

Orange County was also the home of the “Jesus People” movement in the late 60's. Traditional charismatic and dispensational Christianity could indeed be translated into folk music (later, Christian rock) and counter-cultural churches where tie-dye and sandals replaced suits and wingtips. Traditional hymns and liturgy supposedly represented the pro-Vietnam War traditionalists and the “uptight” middle class. Sad to say, many churches thought this challenge from the youth to be a threat, rather than a golden opportunity. Seizing the opportunity, the Calvary Chapel movement was born. If you have ever sung a praise song, or witnessed drums, bass-guitars, and praise and worship singers in your church, you probably have Chuck Smith and Calvary Chapel to thank.

Though Chuck Smith was a pastor to a whole generation of local kids because traditional churches didn't seem to care about the questions their youth were asking and Chuck Smith did, the transformation of the traditional church service into the youth-oriented pop-culture worship of the Jesus People, surely had unintended consequences. Over time, worship became an “experience.” Theologically illiterate men and women who played guitar and could sing, soon became “ministers” and were leading worship and giving testimonies. Christianity became “cool.” And to supply this burgeoning new market with all the accouterments of evangelical “coolness,” the Evangelical subculture was born. Stephen King and Eric Clapton were out. Christian novels, Christian movies, and Christian pop music were in.

Fast-forward the timeline two decades. This brings us to Southern Baptist church-growth Guru, Rick Warren and his massive Saddleback Community Church in South Orange County with about 25,000 members. Tanned and casual, Rick Warren's sermons are entertaining and deal with issues that

successful, white, upper middle-class Orange Countians find important. He's very good at what he does. But more importantly, Rick Warren's book on church growth, *The Purpose Driven Church*, has given theological justification to the notion that the church's very existence is centered in evangelism and outreach. The church, says Warren, exists to evangelize non-Christians. Therefore, the church is “purpose-driven.”

If evangelism is the reason for the church's existence, then everything the church does should serve the end of seeing new people—now called “seekers” or even “clients” in some circles—come to Christ. Every obstacle to that end must be removed. This is why traditional church furniture and architecture have been replaced by theater seating and stages. The wooden pulpit is now plexiglass. The sublime lighting on the cross has given way to shimmering stage lights for the worship band. Preaching and liturgy have given way to entertainment, drama and skits. Projector screens complete with the latest high-tech multimedia have replaced the crude sign-board with this Sunday's hymn numbers. The transformation is dramatic. All of it in the name of evangelism, of course.

Robert Schuller excels at marketing Christianity. Schuller proved that a local church could give the people what they want. *Possibility Thinking* and *The Hour of Power* are the twin-children of the marriage between post-war economic prosperity and good ole American pragmatism. It was Chuck Smith who introduced youth-dominated pop-culture into Christian worship. Keep the kids happy! If kids don't like the pipe organ, bring on the rock band! And it is Rick Warren who articulated the Arminian principle that sinners seek God, and that the church's purpose—to reach out to the lost—justifies its very existence. All of these factors in one way or another have contributed to the church of the lowest common denominator.

I mention these particular examples to make a point. The focus of the church of the lowest common denominator is me. The sermon is about problems I face. The music is music I like. The church service is designed to entertain me. That explains why they all look and sound so much alike. Somehow, God got lost in all the talk about my felt needs. The

theology of the church of the lowest common denominator is utterly man-centered. It is all about me—or at least that's how I am made to feel. This is where we as Reformed Christians must make our stand.

Now, before you say to yourself, here's yet another narrow-minded Reformed pastor who doesn't care about evangelism and who is a defender of traditionalism and conservatism, let me issue the following caveat. I think that a great deal of the criticism conservative Reformed Christians receive from the church growth people is well deserved. Reformed churches have a reputation for being a bit stand-offish and unfriendly to newcomers. There are far too many Reformed people who think about the future of the church by conjuring up images of the past. “Oh, if only things were like they were back in the 1950's.” What is worse, perhaps, is that there are far too many Reformed Christians who are satisfied with small, deeply-divided denominations, in which the great treasure of Reformed worship and theology is hidden under a bushel, while turf and clan are fiercely defended against all comers.

While I will fight against theological liberalism with every ounce of strength I have, I am not one who is satisfied with the “well, we've always done it this way,” answer I hear from some Reformed conservatives. I don't think the CRC or RCA of the 1950's is the model for Reformed churches of the new millennium either. We must be Reformed and confessional, not traditionalists. We must look forward, not back. But wisdom dictates that we must do so without neglecting the faith of our fathers, nor should we forget the lessons they have taught us. Our role is to add to their labors, to build our churches upon the solid foundation they have given us. Yet, the issues they faced and the battles they fought are not the same ones facing us today. They would be the first to tell us to move on.

This is why we need to ask the hard questions. When it comes to evangelism, just how are we doing? Do we pray for our churches to grow by means other than live births? How many adult baptisms have we witnessed? Do we even care about the fate of those who are perishing in their sins because they might be different from us? Are the members of our church all of the same race and

socio-economic background? And what are we doing to make it easier for non-Christians and visitors to come to our services? These are real questions, and the church growth people are correct to ask them. It is too bad, however, that they sought answers to them from the culture, not from the Scriptures or the Reformed tradition.

With that out of the way, this too must be said. We do not need to become practical Arminians to see our churches grow. The solution is both very simple and quite risky. The solution is simple because we don't have far to go to find the answer—the Scriptures, our own theology, liturgy and confessions. They contain everything we need to see Reformed churches grow, multiply and flourish. We don't need to reinvent the theological wheel. Yet, this is risky because it means that by employing our existing resources in new ways our churches may no longer be enclaves for white cultural conservatives. If we put our theology into practice, our churches will look much more like the communities of North America—filled with all races, cultures and socio-economic groups. This kind of change can be disconcerting, though it must be pointed out that this is not because of latent racism as some may argue. The discomfort has to do with having our comfort zones challenged. Change is never easy. It is hard to reach out to others outside familiar territory.

The solution is to take the focus off me, and put it back where it belongs, on God. Instead of the church of the lowest common denominator, a Reformed church should be the church of the highest common denominator. But what does a church of the highest common denominator look like? It looks like this—it is a church where the theology, worship and evangelism is God-centered, not man-centered.

In a God-centered church of the highest common denominator, God is the evangelist, not the minister, and where every member is an ambassador of Christ. Instead of adopting an unbiblical “seeker” philosophy, in which the church “dumbs-down” its worship service, supposedly, to reach non-Christians, Reformed Christians are to take very seriously what the Bible says about “seekers.” They don't exist! According to Paul “there is no one who

seeks God” (Romans 3:11). Rather, our confidence is in the God who seeks sinners!

How does God seek sinners? He seeks them through his preached word (Romans 10:14)! Therefore, a growing Reformed church is a word-centered church. A church of the highest common denominator is a church where the word of God is preached. It is a church where the word of God is taught. It is a place where the promises that God makes in his word are trusted and diligently sought. The church of the highest common denominator is a church where the minister is not an entertainer but a preacher. He is not a motivator, but a man of prayer. He is not a manager, but a student of God's word. The members of such a church likewise attend to the word. They read it, they learn it, and they teach it to their children.

From a theological perspective, a church of the highest common denominator is a church where the law is preached in all its terror, the gospel in all its sweetness, and where the Christian life is centered in gratitude for all that God has done for us in Christ. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper will be prominent, since these are holy signs and seals for us to see, and which confirm in our hearts the faith produced by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the word. These are the “techniques” God uses to move sinners to repentance and to confirm the saints in the joy and comfort of their salvation. Programs are fine as they serve and support the preached word and sacraments. But they can never replace them. Why? Programs are about me. Word and sacrament are about God.

From a practical perspective the church of the highest common denominator will have a sense of purpose and drama each Lord's day precisely because it is God-centered. Indeed, there is nothing as dramatic as the story of redemption. It is positively spell-binding. But as Dorothy Sayers once quipped, the gospel is the drama, though it took the priests of the Church of England a generation to make it boring! If we preach as though we were giving a lecture, if we read the Scriptures without conviction, if we pray as though we were going through the motions, of course, our people will be bored. Lest we forget, the historic Reformed liturgy is very dramatic if utilized properly, and it contains

all those elements of worship prescribed in the Scriptures—i.e., a confession of faith, confession of sin, declaration of pardon, pastoral prayer, and so on. Christ being hidden in the Old Testament to be revealed in the New makes for a very compelling story. Preaching is showing forth Christ in his saving offices of prophet, priest and king. How can that be boring?

The church of the highest common denominator will also worship in a way which seeks to glorify God, not entertain seekers. We must never forget that God is the audience on the Lord's day, not those who sit in the pews. The tragedy in the man-centered worship typical of the church of the lowest common denominator is not that it worships with drums and guitars, but that its attendees show up expecting to watch a performance. The minister had better be funny. The music had better be good. And don't bother seekers with a bunch of prayers for someone they don't know. In fact, if they don't like a particular church, they'll just go down the street to the next church and try it out. The more glitz and glamour, the more hype and noise, the better.

But the church of the highest common denominator does not try and please such fickle folk by tickling their ears. It seeks to please God through the singing of God honoring hymns and Psalms, and by offering up prayers of praise and supplication. It seeks to recount God's own mighty acts by reading from the whole of Scripture with the eager anticipation that God still speaks to us through his word. Instead of looking to pollster George Barna to find out what's hot this week, the church of the highest common denominator consults the Scriptures to find out what God says his people need to hear when they assemble for worship. The church of the highest common denominator does not debate whether a style of music will attract young people and seekers, but whether or not it will please God and be able to carry the content of a God-centered theology. The church of the highest common denominator is not about being successful. It is about being faithful, trusting God, not man-made techniques to secure genuine numerical growth.

The church of the highest common denominator will not downplay its doctrinal distinctives, but will shout them from the rooftop. I like to speak of this

as running our distinctives up the flagpole, proudly displaying them for all to see. This is what we are. This is what we believe. Here is where we stand. There should be something distinctive about a Reformed church. It should be different and stand out from the church of the lowest common denominator. Such a church will stand for something and be willing to teach and defend those things it regards as precious. Instead of telling people that doctrine doesn't matter—which only plants the seed that Christianity doesn't matter—the church of the highest common denominator will tell everyone who will listen the truth in love. The great irony is that by telling the truth in love, a church attracts people to worship together based upon something absolutely fundamental—the doctrine taught us by none other than Jesus himself—and which can truly unite them, not because they happen to like the minister, or because their kids like the youth program, or because the music at church sounds just like what they hear on their favorite FM-radio station. People who are attracted by these latter means will just as easily leave when they get a better offer. The great untold story of the mega-church is the revolving backdoor. These “seekers” drop out almost as fast as they drop in. But the church-growth experts don't tell us that. The church of the highest common denominator doesn't define itself by what it does. Rather, what it is defines what it does. Rick Warren has it exactly backwards. The church is not “purpose-driven.” Rather, it has a church-driven purpose. This means that the church of the highest common denominator is that place where its members are joined and united in mind and heart and will by the Holy Spirit around the doctrine revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It is that place where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered according to the word of God. Such a church also governs itself according to God's word. It exists to give God glory and honor, as well as to

comfort, equip and strengthen God's people. This is its reason for existence, not evangelism.

But if a church is truly a church of the highest common denominator, it will be like a beacon, drawing Christ's sheep into its fold. By striving to please God rather than to be popular with man, the church of the highest common denominator will be an evangelistic church, seeing itself as equipping ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors of Christ, who are willing and able to tell people the awful truth about the human condition and guilt of their sins, as well as the glories and comfort of the gospel. A church of the highest common denominator will see men and women come to faith in Jesus Christ. Why? Such a church will pray to that end, and trust in God to bring a great harvest. This church will look to the power of the preached word, not the sales-pitch. The members of this church—having been taught and catechized—will be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within them to the skeptic, as well as communicate the claims of Christ in simple terms to their next-door neighbor over coffee. Non-Christians will be welcomed in this church. And we will witness their baptisms and their professions of faith. In doing so, we will, as the author of Hebrews puts it, “taste the goodness of the word of God, and the powers of the coming age” (Hebrews 6:5). The church of the highest common denominator has Christ's own promise that his sheep will hear his voice. It will grow and thrive. Therefore, the solution is easy. Let us be faithful Reformed Christians. Let us put our own theology into practice. The risk we must take is that the church of the highest common denominator will be a place where our comfort zones may disappear and where change will be inevitable. This is never easy. But it will always be worth the risk.

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