

“Will the Real Church Please Stand Up?”

by Dave Hunt

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Apparently sometimes, at least with imaginary fairies, all that is needed for flourishing health is having enough people believe in you. I wonder if this approach could be adopted by the evangelical church community – or perhaps already has been. If enough Christians believed the church was healthy, maybe she would be. Maybe if we clap loudly, we will make enough noise to give the appearance of being vigorous. Yet despite all the claims of spiritual interest, despite the runaway numerical growth at the celebrated megachurches, despite frequent “sightings” of revival and despite the rapid succession of fads (from Promise Keepers to the “Prayer of Jabez” to “Forty Days of Purpose” to “The Passion of the Christ”), each promising to reform the church, the fact is the church’s light is flickering. Let’s start with the obvious – numbers. Megachurches (worship attendance of 2000 or more) are springing up weekly (there were 842 in February 2004), church buildings are rapidly being constructed, Christian concerts and rallies are well attended, and other glowing statistics could be given. However, two recent studies have cast an ominous shadow over this seeming success. George Barna, in an e-mail dated May 4, 2004, informs us that since 1991 there has been a 92% increase in the number of adults in America who do not attend church (from 39 million to 75 million). Then U.S. News and World Report in its April 19, 2004, issue stated, “Surveys confirm that the percentage of Americans attending a weekly worship service fell appreciably during the past four decades. From roughly 40 percent in the 1960s, it today hovers at about a quarter.” Something just does not add up.

Barna, in his attempt to scrutinize this church attendance freefall, candidly writes, “Unchurched people are not just lazy or uninformed. They are wholly disinterested in church life – often passionately so. Stirring worship music won’t attract them because worship isn’t even on their radar screen. More comfortable pews cannot compete with the easy chair or the bed that already serve the unchurched person well. Church events cannot effectively compete with what the world has to offer.” This analysis should come as no surprise in light of Scriptures such as Romans 3:11, There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; and 1 Corinthians 1:18, For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Why did anyone ever think that unbelievers were going to be attracted to Christ if we could only offer Him in an attractive package? The truth is, rather than drawing people to Christ, the gospel message has itself been gutted of its power.

What are the followers of Christ to do? Barna suggests, “The rapidly swelling numbers of unchurched people may be forcing existing churches to reinvent

their core spiritual practices while holding tightly to their core spiritual beliefs. It will take radically new settings and experiences to effectively introduce unchurched individuals to biblical principles and practices.” This strikes me as the same rhetoric that the seeker-sensitive church has been propagating for years. For two decades the church-growth experts have told us that if we are to attract the unchurched, we must change the way we “do church.” We must offer them new “settings and experiences.” We must meet their perceived felt-needs. We must do away with biblical exposition and focus on stories. We must eliminate dogma and become relevant. We must do away with hymns and major on contemporary music. We must remove our Christian symbols and traditions and behave more professionally and secularly. We must train our pastors to be CEO’s rather than shepherds. When we have done all of this, we have been assured, we will attract the masses. Now, after two decades of church leaders buying and implementing everything that the market-driven gurus have offered, we find far fewer people attending church services (of any kind). Their methodologies have failed, yet Barna encourages us to keep it up. If we can just change enough, if we can just offer the right experiences and become more creative, surely we will ultimately break through.

But this is the wrong approach. The church cannot, as Barna has noted, compete with the world system. We just don’t have the money, the people, the expertise. But more importantly we are not offering what the world offers. And this is where we need to concentrate our thinking. The Christian community has something to offer that no one else has: the truth as found in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. Rather than running about trying to keep up with the world, we need to return to the one thing the world cannot give.

But herein lies a major problem. While the evangelical church has been chasing the ever changing fads and whims of our society, she has jettisoned her unique message. At the same time that the church has forgotten her purpose, she has also been infiltrated by a wide range of diluting and corrupting influences that have changed the very core of her being. In *This Little Church Went to Market* I identified many of these influences. Others will be identified at this time, but in the milieu of the biblical understanding of the church. I want to discuss what God says a church should be – what it should hold dear and emphasize, what its distinctive should be. All of this will be done in the context of the unique pressures and temptations facing God’s people in the twenty-first century. It is not enough to identify what is wrong with the church; we must also offer an alternative – one firmly founded in the timeless Word of God rather than in the trends of tomorrow. If much of the modern church has sold its birthright and gone “to market,” what would a church look like that resisted these trends and “stayed home”? That is, what would a church be like if it drew its cues from Scripture – if it truly believed that God has a paradigm for the church outlined in His Word? This will be the approach for our next several papers.

Harvard professor Kirsopp Lake made this insightful observation: "It is a mistake often made by educated persons who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind. It is the partial uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in Christian churches in the eighteenth century who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the fundamentalist may be wrong. I think he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the corpus theologicum of the church are on the fundamentalist's side."

Lake, who was writing in the 1920s and represented the emerging liberal wing of Christendom, hit the nail on the head. Fundamentalists (those who adhere to the fundamentals of the faith) had not, and have not, moved. Their final authority continues to be the Scriptures. They attempt to develop their personal lives and local churches according to the instruction and model found in the Bible. The classic liberal, lacking confidence in the Word, marching to the tune of modernity, developed a quasi-Christianity created in the image of man – they have reaped what they sowed. The so-called new paradigm church movement today has not bothered to dispense with the Scriptures. In fact many, if not most, of these churches consider themselves evangelical and would declare that they are believers in the inerrancy of the Bible. The problem is they lack confidence in the Scriptures and have therefore co-mingled it with a plethora of supplemental sources. The effect is that while clinging tenaciously to a doctrinal statement affirming biblical inerrancy, the authority of Scripture has been undermined. Of what real value is a Bible that we cannot trust? If the Bible is not sufficient, as well as inerrant, then it has no real impact in how we live or how we structure the church. In essence, the new paradigm church, during these last two decades, has done exactly what the liberal church did a hundred years ago – they just have not been honest enough to admit it (or perhaps are ignorant of what they have done). Both groups have replaced Scripture with the wisdom of their age. Instead of evaluating every thought and movement of society by the Word, they have pressed the Scriptures through the grid of modern thought. That portion of the Word which survives this process can be embraced; the portion that does not can be ignored. Few are so bold as to say this out loud, leading to much confusion and deception, but this is the spiritual landscape in which the twenty-first century church navigates. This is the mindset of the vast majority of evangelicals . . .

An excerpt from Dave Hunt article in the Berean call.