

Christian Reconstruction

61:4

Vol. XVIII, No. 6

© Gary North, 1994

November/December 1994

CRITICAL MASS

Part 22: Segregated Churches

by Gary North

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were notable to bear it, neither yet now are ye able (1 Cor. 3:1-2).

Paul acknowledges here that his listeners had not been able to understand the spiritual message of Christianity. They had been ready only to hear the simplest message. Now, however, he warns them about factions. They had been led astray.

This should warn us: it is necessary and legitimate to tailor our presentation of the gospel to the abilities and maturity of those who are ready to listen. It is mandatory to teach theology to a children's Sunday school, but the level of understanding is low. We know by experience that teaching by Bible story is the most effective method. The child can understand a story. He cannot understand a treatise on theology. This is why there are no treatises on theology in the Bible. The old phrase, "The Bible isn't a textbook on . . ." actually applies to theology. But the Bible provides the theoretical foundations for textbooks in every field, including theology.

Comprehensive Worship

Who should be left out of worship? The answer is obvious: no one.

Whose needs should worship serve? The answer is obvious: everyone's.

What should liturgy be in order to meet the needs of everyone? The answer is automatic: ours.

Here is the problem: Paul taught milk to the Corinthians - entry-level theology. This indicates that with respect to preaching, he dumbed-down the original message. Should pastors follow his lead? If so, at which service?

But Paul was not a pastor. He was an apostle. He came for a visit. Can we use this preaching as our model? What about his letters to the Corinthians? Are these aimed at meat eaters or milk drinkers? They are difficult to read. They are theological. Should they be the model for preaching? If so, at which service?

After we draw conclusions regarding the content of preaching, we must then go to discussions regarding public prayer, music, recitation, standing, sitting, and a lot more. This is the question of liturgy. The church, as a comprehensive corporate structure, has reached no conclusion. My contention: for at least as long as men adopt different diets, there will not be a single liturgy.

What everyone formally agrees on is that the church must meet the needs of everyone. What creates the problem is the

definition of church: local congregation or international organization? That the international church must seek to meet the needs of every tribe and tongue does not mean that every congregation should seek to do this. The division of labor in the institutional church is cross-congregational, not intra-congregational.

The church, it is said, is the most segregated institution in America. This is true, but only if we are speaking of the local congregation. The church is the most integrated institution on earth when considered as the body of believers. Its only rival in this regard is Islam. Each local congregation is segregated. This is the international church's crucial institutional advantage over all of its rivals.

The advertiser knows that any advertising campaign that is aimed at everyone will fail. The ad cannot produce in a large number of individuals sufficient motivation for them to buy the product or service. To motivate individuals, the ad must offer benefits to specific users. The narrower the market, the stronger the appeal. The ad should be designed to meet the desires of people who are highly motivated, but only with regard to a unique set of solutions. A person who is dying of an incurable and obscure disease is more likely to respond to an ad for a cure for this disease than he is to an ad offering a cure for the common cold, even if the price of the cure of his disease is much higher. Similarly, the person with a common cold is less likely to respond to the ad for the obscure disease's cure.

The uniqueness of the gospel is that it offers an individually applicable solution - eternal life - to a universally shared problem: original sin. But to persuade an individual of the truth of the gospel, the presentation of the message must be tailored to his specific situation. The three-year-old is not ready to respond to the Epistle to the Romans.

Who Is Your Audience?

Who is your church's audience? This will be a tiny subsection, highly segregated, of the population of your town, your state, your nation, and the world.

Within a congregation there are subsets, e.g., infants, toddlers, teenagers, married adults, single adults, and the elderly. At what time in the service are the needs of each subset of your audience met? To find out, examine the liturgy.

Here is the problem: no liturgy can meet the unique needs of all subsets in one hour. It can meet the general needs, but this leaves most needs unmet. Generally, the liturgy meets the needs of those who pay the bills. Money talks. Examine the liturgy to see who is buying.

Every church has a liturgy governing baptism and the Lord's Supper. Every church has a liturgy governing marriage

and funerals. In Anglo-American Protestantism, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer generally governs funerals and often governs marriages. For example, nobody ever speaks in tongues at funerals, even in the most Pentecostal of Pentecostal churches. It is universally regarded as inappropriate, so it is not done. Etiquette governs liturgy. But etiquette varies, church to church.

Liturgy and Taste

A liturgy always excludes far more people than it includes. Those who like the liturgy have a reason to stay, but liturgies are like specific cuisines: they are a matter of taste. The enormous variation of types of cooking is very nearly matched by the enormous number of liturgies.

Let us face facts: most people like high-fat content cuisines. When we go out to dinner, we go to French, Mexican, American Chinese, or Italian restaurants. I would not recommend investing your pension fund money in a chain of imitation English restaurants called The Brussels Sprout. You might risk re-investing in a British fish & chips chain: mostly fat, but even Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips went bankrupt.

Let us face another fact: Anglican liturgy is about as popular as Brussels sprouts. It is an acquired taste. The same can be said of Eastern Orthodoxy's two and a half hours of ancient Greek chanting and recitation. As liturgies get livelier, congregations get larger. There are limits on this process, but somewhere in between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Sweeter Than Honey Church (a local congregation) is where most Christians worship.

Who is your targeted audience? Certain sections of the country have specific liturgical tastes. It is as unwise to expect high church Episcopalianism to appeal in a rural community in the American South as it is to expect Pentecostalism to appeal in a Minnesota farming community. Middle-of-the-road liturgies - Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist - are acceptable to more people.

Narrowcasting

Today, audiences are narrowing. The familiar "Top 40" radio programming of the mid-1950's through the 1970's has gone the way of *Life*, *Look*, and *Collier's*. With the coming of 500 to 1,000 television channels (initially) and an equal or greater number of CD-disk music channels (initially), the high fidelity FM radio stations will go the way of AM radio. Fiber optic channels will have far better sound and far more specialized broadcasting. The wave of the future is called narrowcasting.

Liturgy will become a unifying factor as narrowcasting spreads. McDonalds shows that there is a market for general tastes. But no one over age six wants to eat every meal at McDonalds. Similarly with liturgy: for a congregation or denomination to attract and keep large numbers of people, it will have to adjust. Local worship will have to become diversified. This means that worship will have to become much longer and more detailed. But most middle-class Americans will not accept long worship services. Long Greek Orthodox services and long inner city music services will not soon spread to the middle-class suburbs.

Within a congregation, there are varying needs and varying abilities to sit through a service. These specific needs cannot

be met in one hour. The solution is to redefine what constitutes total worship: from one service to one day.

Worship begins for a few at a morning prayer meeting. Attendees tend to be older. They are not parents of young children. They can get out the door at 8:30 in the morning. This meeting is in preparation for the evangelistic services of the two morning meetings.

After morning prayer comes the first morning worship service, aimed more at the older, mature, traditional members. The morning prayer people attend early morning worship. The rule is: no guitars, no overhead projector ditties, and well-worn hymnals. This service should last at least one hour.

Then comes Sunday school.

After Sunday school comes late-morning worship. The liturgy here depends on the evangelism strategy for a targeted audience. The walking wounded must be kept awake. The liturgical lowest common denominator drops lower. Weekly communion is not practical as the congregation grows large.

The evening service is for the hard core. It should emphasize theological training and the Lord's Supper.

The worship service is defined broadly. It meets the specific liturgical needs of a broad sweep of members, but not in one session. For the spiritually mature and the leadership, worship begins at morning prayer and ends with evening communion.

Structure and Content

What should structure the form of worship? The five-point covenant model. Liturgically, worship is divided into five sections. First, a confession of faith, such as the Apostles Creed, declaring that a transcendent God lived among us. Second, public acknowledgment of subservience to this God; the Lord's Prayer would be appropriate here. Third, a reading of the law: the Ten Commandments. Fourth, sanctions: the sacraments. Fifth, a call to go forth to extend the kingdom of God.

If done in one worship service, these segments would be divided up by three hymns/psalms, plus traditional responses: "Praise God," "Glory be to the Father," etc. It would go something like the following: confession of faith, "Glory be," hymn, Lord's Prayer, hymn, Ten Commandments, sermon, psalm, collection, "Praise God," sacrament, exhortation.

If a congregation has other non-negotiable traditional practices, the early morning service could go to 90 minutes. To keep this service shorter, some of these covenantal segments may have to be moved to morning prayer and evening communion.

Conclusion

The local church is segregated because it meets the spiritual needs of a specialized audience. The international church is not segregated because it meets the needs of every kind of person. The local church is specialized in the same way that restaurants are specialized. Anyone who wants to worship locally can lawfully do so, just as he can choose a restaurant. And just as a restaurant's menu changes throughout the day - breakfast, lunch, and dinner - so should the liturgical menu. If every worship service is liturgically the same, the total number of participants will be smaller.