

The “Purpose-Driven” Church Paradigm

Dub McClish

Introduction

Churches should have goals and aims. In this sense every congregation of the Lord’s people should be driven by purpose rather than stumbling along haphazardly. However, *purpose-driven* has taken on special meaning in “evangelical” circles since the publication a few years ago of *The Purpose-Driven Church*, by Rick Warren of the Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, California.

The Purposes of “Purpose-Driven” Churches

By giving people what they want (e.g., entertainment, emotionally appealing, Pentecostal-type “worship” activities, semi-soft rock music, drama, brief and amusing pep talks that pass for preaching, encouraging come-as-you-are attire, etc.) and omitting denominational affiliation in its name, this church has become one of the new “Mega Community Churches.” Warren apparently took some of his cues from the original and perhaps best known of these modern churches – Bill Hybels’ Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. Warren’s “purposes” appear to be two: (1) supply what otherwise irreligious people in their surrounding areas say they want in a church (never mind what God wants) and (2) rapid and huge numerical growth by whatever means it takes. Their doctrine and practice are pragmatic: whatever will draw and keep the people. The Saddleback Website boasts that Warren has taught over 180,000 “pastors” his church growth program since 1980. His book has sold over one million copies.

“Purpose-Driven” Advocates Once “Among” Us

Many of those who have gone out from us have found just what they are looking for in the Community/Purpose-Driven Church movement. The likes of Lynn Anderson and Wayne Kilpatrick have been to the Hybels mecca and have come home singing its praises. Max Lucado has spoken in glowing terms of Hybels and his operation. Those making pilgrimages to Illinois and California are learning “how to plant/grow a church,” as well as “how to change a church.”

Warren has likely influenced more people than Hybels has. In fact, one will find the things that some of “our” apostates are gaga over (e.g., praise teams, preachers in casual dress roving a stage with microphone in hand like Las Vegas performers, small group/cell structure,

hand clapping, lack of Biblical emphasis, membership “covenants,” et al.) are stock-in-trade with these churches.

Some of these errant brethren have been honest enough to separate themselves from faithful congregations and begin their own Community Churches (e.g., Hendersonville Community Church, Hendersonville, TN, and Cordova Community Church, Memphis, TN). We can be thankful they left the Lord’s name out of the names of their denominations. However, others have ascended to the Mega Church high places and have come down intent on stealing existing churches from those old stick-in-the-mud traditionalists who still love the Bible and its pattern for the church.

The Madison Turmoil

The Madison, Tennessee, Church of Christ is a case in point. This suburban Nashville congregation has been irreparably torn apart by events that have come to a head over the past several years. (Let none infer for a moment that I rejoice over Madison’s turmoil. I refer to it only because of its high profile among us for many years and because the source of its problems so well illustrates the folly and evils of culture-driven religion.) The liberal-biased *Christian Chronicle* ran a front-page story on Madison’s troubles in its January 2002 issue, confirming the depth of the problem.

Under the influence of the late Ira North, this congregation rose to and maintained a place of great (and generally good) leadership and prominence. For several years it was the largest congregation among us. While some of North’s connections, projects, and influences raised questions of compromise in the minds of some of us more than twenty-five years ago, upon his death in 1984, a succession of increasingly compromising preachers has occupied the Madison pulpit, reflecting the severe weakness and/or unfaithfulness of its eldership.

The doctrinal faultline at Madison became undeniably evident to all but the most naive during the years that Steve Flatt (former President of David Lipscomb University) preached there. During his tenure Madison instigated the infamous (now defunct) “Nashville Jubilee,” and for most of its run was one of its three major sponsors. The Madison leadership apparently had no problem with the close relationship this implied between Madison and the Woodmont Hills Church of Shelly (not to be confused with the church of Christ). After several years of financially supporting and defending the Jubilee’s varied corruptions, not long before its demise Madison withdrew its support. However, I have never seen a hint that their withdrawal had anything to do with the Jubilee’s radical liberalism.

What began as mild rumblings of uneasiness in the late 1990s among some at Madison who loved the Lord and His Truth has now become a full-fledged congregational temblor. From a Sunday morning worship attendance of 3,200 only three years earlier, they fell to 2,400 in 2002. A large number of concerned brethren could see that the church was literally being stolen from them. They established a Website (concernedmembers.com/madison) in an attempt to rally faithful brethren. (In the first eight weeks of its operation, the Site attracted over 22,645 visits.) Some of the one hundred deacons called upon all fifteen of the elders to resign, but only two did so immediately.

The Keith Lancaster Factor

While the turmoil became public in January 2002, it apparently began soon after the hiring of Keith Lancaster as “Worship and Music Minister” about 1999. (Interestingly, when I clicked the “Ministry Team” button on Maddison’s Website, the only thing on the page was a picture and biographical sketch of Lancaster, implying that he is the total “ministry team.” I had to read the Website church bulletin to learn that they even have someone they call a “preacher,” Bruce C. White.)

Lancaster has made a name for himself since 1987 as the founder and promoter of the Acappella and Acappella Vocal Band singing groups, which have served to confuse worship with professional entertainment in the minds of thousands of Christian young people (and parents). He demonstrated his disdain for Biblical authority several years ago when he helped lead a renegade group away from the faithful East Wood Street Congregation in Paris, Tennessee.

The hiring of Lancaster by the Madison elders removed any lingering doubts about their intent. It was an unmistakable signal of their determination to forsake the old paths and pursue new and strange (to the Bible) ones. Lancaster went to work preparing “praise teams” (one of the community church tactics of change mentioned above). The elders allowed (commissioned?) him to start a separate “contemporary” worship hour at the same time the “traditional” service continued to be conducted (starting a “contemporary worship” hour while maintaining a “traditional” one so as not to unduly alarm the older folk is another trademark of the community church changers and infiltrators). The “contemporary” hour was marked by such things as replacing familiar hymns with modern, unknown songs, hand clapping, singing during the Lord’s supper, raising the hands during prayer, and cutting the “sermon” to an abbreviated talk.

Soon thereafter the “contemporary” was combined with the “traditional” 10:30 assembly and the sparks began to fly in earnest. Sound brethren simply could not abide the “hip,” “with-it” foolishness of the contemporary culture-conforming crowd. The controversy became so public that a Nashville TV station ran a news story on it. About the time the “contemporary worship” hour was combined with the “traditional,” a member who had visited Saddleback began a class on the way to “transition” Madison into the pattern of the Saddleback Church. The pattern of Madison’s makeover was rapidly becoming more apparent.

The tension became so great that the elders imported Larry Sullivan, a “mediator” from Pepperdine University and a “specialist” in church dispute resolution. He was hardly unbiased (which a viable “mediator” must be). His Website reputedly is headlined, “Leading Congregational Change,” which is the title of a book he also promotes. It is surely not mere coincidence that Sullivan’s Website also quotes Rick Warren of the Saddleback Church as strongly commending this book. Concerned Madison brethren can be excused for accusing the elders of bringing in not a “mediator” in Sullivan, but a **facilitator** to help them change the church according to the “Purpose-Driven,” compromise/create consensus/conform paradigm.

Some Observations

Congregational disruptions rarely occur spontaneously, and neither did Madison’s. The sad circumstance that now prevails is the result of a gradual, constant, and increasing drift over several years. As earlier indicated, many of us were concerned about at least some of the tendencies at Madison during the North era. However, the doctrinal weakness and compromise became steadily more evident over the years, resulting in open warfare between things old and new, Scripture and culture, the New Testament pattern and a denominational paradigm for congregational work, organization, worship, and growth.

The elders must shoulder the principal blame for Madison’s strife and turmoil. Their long, unbroken record of supporting unsound men and liberal causes, the hiring of Keith Lancaster, and their decision to remake the church along cultural and contemporary lines has brought this rebellion upon them. Doubtless, some Madison members at times felt uneasy, knowing something was wrong, but they could not quite “put their finger on it.” Not wanting to “cause trouble,” they gave their elders “the benefit of the doubt” as the line between Truth and error was increasingly blurred over the years. Finally, the contrast between worldly and Scriptural worship was so evident that these good folks could no longer tolerate it.

Ignorance is likely a large factor in Madison's problems. This defect also reflects poorly on the elders who have the responsibility both to feed the flock and to protect it from destroyers (Acts 20:28-30; Heb. 13:17). The elders were not asleep at the switch; they had **thrown** the switch that derailed Madison. Had brethren been informed of the ill winds of digression blowing over the brotherhood for decades, they could have recognized the things that made them justifiably uneasy. But the Madison elders could not have warned the members about liberalism and how to recognize it without indicting themselves and their liberal preachers. Having said this, every Christian still has a personal responsibility to read, study, learn, be informed, and grow on his own. There is a desperate need for every saint to read sound books and periodicals and to attend lectureships where the Bible is unapologetically preached and where error and apostasy are exposed. Unfortunately, many seem to attribute almost a virtue to ignorance of false doctrines and their perpetrators.

Madison squandered a tremendous opportunity for good influence. Had it stood uncompromisingly for the Truth, it might have helped turned back the grievous wave of liberalism that has overwhelmed so many of the congregations in Nashville and its environs. It might have blunted some of the evil influence of Woodmont Hills and David Lipscomb University. Instead, it has itself been a leader in the digression and has by its example encouraged others to compromise.

The employment of a prejudiced professional peacemaker from Pepperdine (the West Coast womb of liberalism) will not solve Madison's problems in any God-pleasing way. Yet how characteristic of liberals this move was — using a humanistic approach to their woes. This "mediator" they called sought peace on the terms of those who called him rather than on the basis of the Scriptures. The aim of such negotiators is to get the brethren with Scriptural convictions to compromise enough that they will stay. Those who refuse to compromise will gladly be dismissed so that they will not be in the way of "progress" toward the goal of making Madison a Community Purpose-Driven Denomination.

Conclusion

There was only one Scriptural remedy for Madison's problems. The elders should have repented and stated that they were going to follow the Bible — culture and community church paradigms be hanged. They should have cleaned house of everyone on the payroll who disagreed. They should have immediately restored Scriptural, reverent worship. They should have tried to bring the liberals to repentance both for their liberalism and for dividing the Lord's church. Failing this, they should have marked them for what they were (Rom. 16:17-18)

and led the church in withdrawing fellowship from them (2 The. 3:6). The church would be smaller, but it would be far stronger, and God would bless it for obeying Him. Let us all pray that God's Word will eventually prevail at Madison.

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an "Editorial Perspective" in the February 2002 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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