

THE COMMUNITY CHURCH

A Brief Overview

Gary McDade

The Lord Jesus Christ established his church on the first Pentecost after the resurrection 33 A.D. in Jerusalem, Israel. The church of Christ was purchased with the precious blood of the Son of God (Acts 20:28). As his loving bride, the church wears his sacred name, the church of Christ (Eph. 5:21-33; Rom. 16:16). Jesus Christ is the head of this one bride, which is his body (Eph. 5:23; 1:21-23). And, "there is one body" (Eph. 4:4). In recent times, men have arisen who are ashamed of the name of Christ's bride and body, "the church of Christ." One example emerges from *The Christian Chronicle* where a deacon from the former Southlake Church of Christ in Dallas, Texas stated that changing the name to the Southlake Boulevard Church and following a Baptist preacher by the name of Rick Warren through his book, **The Purpose-Driven Church**, was "removing a barrier to the community" (April, Vol. 57, No. 4). Dozens of examples like this can be cited from the March and April editions of *The Christian Chronicle*. The names being substituted in the place of the scriptural name "church of Christ" constitute a departure from heaven's way. Salvation is only in the name of Christ, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Those who have become ashamed of Christ and his sacred name will be condemned, for he said, "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mk. 8:38).

In the place of heeding the great commission (Matt. 28:18-20) by sowing the good seed of the kingdom, which is the word of God (Lk. 8:11), and being content and honored to be workers together with God (II Cor. 6:1) allowing him to give the increase (I Cor. 3:6), these people are following a so-called "paradigm" or model for church growth from Barrington, Illinois called "Willow Creek Community Church." They speak of "practical" Christian doctrine which is "pragmatic," meaning whatever works to bring in the numbers of people and dollars (*The Bridge*, Harding Graduate School of Religion, Volume 41, Number 4, July 2000, p. 1). Their goal clearly is to please "people today" or "contemporary Christians" (*ibid.*). And, from where did Bill Hybels, founder of WCCC, get this model now being so widely imitated among denominational people like Rick Warren and many Christians who formerly considered themselves to be members of the church

of Christ? Hybels wrote in **Rediscovering Church**, "But what could seem like a patterned formula is actually a twenty-year response to the fluid, daily, unpredictable leading of God. The unimpressive truth is that we made the whole thing up as we went along, trusting the Holy Spirit for each next step, rarely seeing which direction the path ahead would take. It was only by following the voice of God--by listening for his particular call to us--that we could move forward with confidence" (p. 53). The Holy Spirit leads, guides, and directs only through his word, the Bible, today (Eph. 6:17; II Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, taking away the Holy Spirit directly leading Hybels all that is left is, "The unimpressive truth is that we made the whole thing up as we went along. . . ."

A summary of this new model will be given in three points: 1) The strategy for changing the name to the Community Church, 2) the organizational structure of the Community Church, and 3) the evangelistic thrust of the Community Church. Point one, the name Community Church is preferred because traditional names are viewed as carrying unwanted baggage. Contemporary people want to be in charge of the church without old restrictions, so a break with the past is made in accepting a new name. Contemporary people do not want to learn Christian doctrine; they just want to be free to express themselves in whatever way they "feel" the Holy Spirit directly is leading them. Point two, the Community Church is organized around a twofold structure, large group celebrations and small affinity groups or cell groups. The way the professor of Christian doctrine at Harding University Graduate School of Religion in Memphis has organized the Community Church of which he is a shepherd is into small groups of eight to sixteen adults. Large group gatherings are celebrations; small group gatherings are "entry points." Informal dress, contemporary Christian music, testimonials, praise team presentations (music and drama), and hand clapping make up the celebration of the large group meetings. Sharing, praying, evangelizing, and Bible study make up the small group meetings. Point three, the evangelistic thrust of the Community Church centers around targeting the type of people the church wants to evangelize. Most pick younger (late thirties or early forties) people who are well educated and have good incomes. The one or ones in charge find out what that group wants and then sets out to unreservedly give it to them. Somehow granting these "contemporary people" what they want is supposed to generate within them holiness and communion with God.

The source from which the Community Church model or paradigm is making its way into the churches of Christ is out in the open. Sadly, it is the Christian schools. The generation who established these schools for the education of Christian young people in an environment conducive to Christian growth and development based

on the inspired word of God are now deceased. Younger men impressed with the soaring expense of operating these enterprises know it will take large sums of money for them to continue to compete for the brightest and best students. Churches now primarily made up of older people have given their all to keep them viable, but their children have married and moved into other cities and communities; their pre-inflation blue-collar-worker dollars no longer are enough. At this point in time, not all of the Christian schools have succumbed to the pressure. They remain worthy of personal and financial support. But, those that are participating in the Community Church movement or are silent about it, thus, facilitating it, are not worthy of another dollar from the pockets of Christian parents who formerly have entrusted their precious children to them for instruction in righteousness (Eph. 5:11).

The schools that are known to be promoting the Community Church from the published sources earlier mentioned are these: Abilene Christian University, Harding University (the academy, undergraduate, and graduate schools are and have supported the Community Church. The dean of the graduate school, Evertt Huffard, is credited with starting the Downtown Church in Memphis way back in 1995. See: Harding Alumni Magazine, August 1995), Oklahoma Christian University, Lipscomb University, Pepperdine University, Rochester College, and Southern Christian University (a retired faculty member, Edward R. Barels, has gone on record in favor of the Community Church, so whether or not SCU itself favors the movement needs to be clarified by SCU officials. SCU's name appears in *The Christian Chronicle* articles). (See editor's note below.)

A leading characteristic of brethren who are in favor of the Community Church is a down play of Bible doctrine and an arrogant chiding of following the Bible as a "blueprint." Isaiah wrote, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20). Jesus said, "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20). Paul wrote, "This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13).

Editor's Note: Alan E. Highers has published the following statement in the January 2001 issue of *The Spiritual Sword*: "We are happy to note that SCU officials have come forward in a forthright manner in disassociating themselves from the community church movement. The chairman of the Board of Regents states: 'I assure you that we hold not one shred of support for the movement that you have described or any of its related false doctrines.' We appreciate this statement and we are pleased to set the record straight."

