

REFORMATION WITHOUT SEPARATION

By Dan Adler

I'm old enough now to have been a part of several transitions in the Church. In the evangelical churches that I was a part of when I was younger, traditional hymns were all that were sung in most congregations. The most "modern" style of music in the church at that time was Southern Gospel songs by groups such as the Gaithers. If "choruses" were sung, they were usually learned at Summer Camp and kids like me would enthusiastically bring them home. And though they were considered fine for the youth, those songs were typically relegated to the sub-spiritual category of songs adults would call "Camp Songs". And I have to say that many of them, like "Father Abraham" and "Pharoah, Pharoah", were about the most meaningless songs I've ever known and truly deserved to be sidelined.

But during that same time the Jesus Movement was hitting the hippie culture, and these converted hippies were taking the modern music they knew and loved best and using it to compose new songs expressing their faith. Some of these songs were upbeat, but many were simple, quiet songs that came to be known as "praise choruses". These songs and other "Jesus Music" began to be recorded and to spread all over the world - especially among younger people. But as has been the tradition in Church history, the introduction of these new songs and the instruments that went with them were resisted by many of those in charge of and in attendance at regular Sunday services. They were labeled as "shallow", "repetitious", "Pentecostal", and "too 'me' centered". Nonetheless, the popularity of these songs continued to grow and new record labels poured them out, and it became clear that the church would no longer be singing just the old hymns. So to accommodate the unhappiness of the older generation with the choruses and the unhappiness of the younger generations with the hymns, many congregations began having separate services with different styles. Where formerly everyone had attended church together, there now became "traditional" services and separate "contemporary" services, and many even accommodated the more tolerant folks by having "blended" services. And that has remained the pattern in many congregations up to this day.

Now I've observed a new trend happening in the church. It seems that "contemporary" worship is now being subdivided into much smaller segments - so that songs that are 4 or 5 years old are now considered quite old and the church, following a hugely marketed Christian music industry, is pressured into chasing the latest songs and the latest trends in order to keep up. Now we also hear words like "Emerging" and "Cutting Edge" and "Post-modern" spoken of everywhere as we try to keep up with methods that will reach the current generation. Sometimes I find all of that a bit exhausting and often seemingly unnecessarily complex, but I must also acknowledge the reality of the need to

adapt our methods and thinking to reach out to this very unchurched culture in new ways and to relate to upcoming generations.

But what troubles me the most in this picture is that some churches are starting yet another separate service to accommodate this latest trend. On many levels this is justified by the need for reformation in churches that are chained to service styles which are now, and have perhaps always been, out of touch with the basic needs and desires of their congregations in the areas of worship and body involvement. But often it is simply to facilitate the specific style demands of an upcoming and sometimes narcissistic generation. Now we have separate services on Sunday evenings for the "emerging generation" where the style of the service is slightly different than what is on Sunday morning in order to accommodate the 20-somethings who need to have their own service. Those who attend these services typically never attend church with the rest of the people on Sunday mornings. They have their own church in their own new way that is completely separate from the rest of their congregation even though they are all of the same ethnic group, socio-economic group and theological base.

On the surface, this can seem exciting and gratifying. "Hey, we've got three hundred young people coming out for a great worship service on Sunday nights. How can you argue with that? We're reaching people! We're ministering to people! There's more community and more intimacy the way it was in the New Testament." And in many ways, that is very exciting. But I have to wonder if anybody ever pulls back and tries to look at the bigger picture, and asks questions such as, "What is the message we are giving, what are we breeding, and what fruit will this bear in the next five to ten years?" At the rate that generations are subdividing, both the music and style of these "emerging" services that are becoming popular right now will certainly be rejected and despised by the next sub-generation in just a few years - requiring the splitting off and starting up of alternative services for these new generations as well. When this current generation starts to marry and have children it will change the dynamics and needs of the congregation, and will cause further separation between those who are married with children and those who aren't.

I'm greatly disturbed to see that we are presenting a consumer message which communicates that even in the church, it's all about you and your personal taste and having things your way. We talk about "real" community being developed in these new services - which I agree is very good and Biblical and much needed - but if the "community" comes down to a group of people who all share the same age and style preference and basic viewpoint, is this really "Biblical Community", or just a subtle form of self-love and intolerance? Will the Body of Christ, those who call themselves His followers, now be separated from each other not only by race, theology, denomination and socio-economics, but also by age, style, musical taste and method? Then within our congregations we will have allowed and encouraged divisions and intolerance, and we will be perpetuating and growing the reality of more sub-cultures within the very sub-culture that the

Church has already become. Instead of breeding communities of people with love, forbearing and forgiving one another, we breed religious sub-cultures who, when push comes to shove, are very impatient and unloving and intolerant of anyone who does things differently than their "club" does it. And, more importantly, we are missing out on all that we were meant to experience in the richness of diversity that God intended us to benefit from, especially across generational lines.

There's no denying that reformation has always been a needed part of Church life. An irony of Lutheranism is that they have a theme of "always reforming". But forms are always in flux and we need to keep our hearts and minds open as to how we can more effectively live out Christian community and reach out to the lost. But since the day Martin Luther nailed his theses on the Wittenburg Door, our method of reformation has seemed to always be through separation and division. There surely are times when the Bible calls us to separate from others who call themselves Christians but embrace sin and heresy. But the separations that mark so much of the division in the Church aren't about that. And this current trend of separation is certainly not about that.

I really believe that reformation is necessary in so many of our churches. I think that much of what is being talked about in the "Emerging Church" and "Open Church" conversations is desperately needed, and is closer to the First Century New Testament Church than what we see in so many of our congregations, where the standard form consists of a worship team, a preacher and an audience. But why can't we reform without splitting off? Perhaps part of the reason is because there is always so much resistance to change coming from status quo leaders and status quo congregants who just like what they're used to. That dynamic then forces those who feel a yearning for change and growth to have to separate in order to accomplish that change. But I think the other reason is because of the selfish-ambition, intolerance and arrogance that can fuel starting the new "cutting edge, exciting, latest" thing. That mindset doesn't even consider reform of the whole as an option. And the lack of Biblical teaching and vision for true, multi-generational, multi-racial community causes these separations to be encouraged because there is no understanding of the negative long-term impact and precedents that are being set.

What would have happened if older people who loved hymns, instead of intolerantly demanding their own service the way they've always done it, didn't greet every new song and service style change with resistance, but found themselves rejoicing in the younger people who were coming to Christ and the songs that they were given to express that new faith? God have mercy! How could those who should be the mature believers in the church fight harder to hold on to what's comfortable and familiar than for the preservation of unity in their midst?! And what would have happened if younger people who loved modern worship, instead of intolerantly demanding their own service with all new songs, didn't insist that the music all had to be done their way, but embraced the old

along with the new and found themselves in loving community with those who, through their experience, had much to offer them? If we could only look into each other's eyes and rejoice when we see a song, any song, connect with the heart of another believer in worship instead of focusing on how that song makes US feel! And now what would happen if the youth of today had a welcome forum to bring their new methods of doing church and their songs to the regular church services, and new life was breathed into the sameness of our services, and real Christian community was produced as a result? Cynics, demographers and Church Growth experts would say that's impossible and unproductive - just like multi-racial congregations, blacks and whites, Asians and Hispanics being able to worship together. We've come to accept that adults and youth must always function separately and we breed that in our youth programming. And we've come to accept that people of different ethnicities are just too different to be able to have Christian community together. But I think the Bible presents a different message and a different call. God has called us out of every tribe, tongue and nation to be a new nation. We are called to mercy, kindness, patience, meekness, humility, sacrificial love and a living out of the agape love of Christ in community - not just with people who are our age, race, education level, socio-economic group or political affiliation. This is not an easy call. It's uphill. It's upstream. It's against the wind. Without the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, it's just impossible. But with the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible and IT'S THE WAY OF THE CROSS! And we're called to walk that way.

So let's seek reformation, but as much it is possible, let's seek it together - not apart. If we're going to start a new service with a different format, let's invite everyone who wants to be a part of it to do so. But better yet, if change needs to happen, let's find ways that we can all go there together as a Christian community, because the world will know we are Christians by our love for one another.