

## A Community Church

As a friend from another state and I were visiting and “talking church,” he asked casually if most of those in our local congregation lived within a mile or two of the meeting house. I responded that few of them lived that close. Then he dismissed it in an under tone, “So you are not a community church.” We pursued it no further.

That stuck in my mind, however. Out of curiosity, I checked through the address list of our attendees. We come from Beaverton, Hillsboro, Gresham, Portland, Tigard, Aloha, Lake Oswego, Warren, Tualatin, Forest Grove, Sherwood, North Plains, West Linn, Newberg, Scappoose, McMinnville, Wilsonville, Cornelius, Aurora and Vancouver, WA --- 20 communities! Hardly a community church! And hardly uncommon among our congregations and the various denominations in metropolitan areas. Good people travel long distances and pass many churches to meet with their kind. Why?

Why is our congregation not composed of the thousands of persons within walking distance of our building? With a few exceptions, our group draws those of the Church of Christ. But there are Churches of Christ in those municipalities from which they come. So, our attendees generally are those from Churches of Christ who like our particular nuances which make us different, though our congregation is very accepting. It begins to take on the character of a monastery (from the Greek meaning “hermit’s cell”). We in our differing groups tend to cloister ourselves from the religious world about us for indoctrination, avoidance of doctrinal contamination, and avoidance of fellowship with those who differ. This practice is common among our churches and other groups also. “Birds of a feather flock together.”

Perhaps you can identify with my upbringing. In my youth our preachers constantly taught our exclusivity. They warned against the doctrinal incorrectness of our religious neighbors. If we visited their services, it was with great intimidation, with no intent of learning how similar our belief was with theirs. We took note of all the differences. We were on the right side of all those differences, whether they were major or minor. In my rare visits to their services, I went with a cloistered mind and a formidable wall about my hermit’s cell of separatism. I listened to their radio teaching with the same critical, defensive attitude. At this late stage in my life, I cannot claim to have fully outgrown that attitude.

We maintain our walls of segregation and build them higher by constant inbreeding in our Bible studies, Christian elementary and high schools, home schooling, seminaries (preacher training schools), universities, and publications. Here I am painting with a brush too broad. This is not a rejection of these

teaching efforts, but an appeal to make them less sectarian. A fact of life is that we do not teach to make Methodists; Methodists do not train Baptists, and Baptists do not produce Presbyterians. So each group has its own supportive systems of indoctrination. As long as various groups continue to emphasize their non-essential doctrinal differences, the roadway to true community churches swerves toward the ditch. We are all willing to be community churches if we can control the whole setup.

Having “Community Church” on the sign out front may not mean much. Being nurtured in any of these monastic courses is not conducive to the concept of a community church. Isolating our trainees into our own educational systems does not necessarily give them the breadth of perspective needed to reach the general public. In similar thought, home schooling allows children to be brought up in a protective shell imposed by parents. It does not necessarily prepare the children to deal with the world in which they must live, nor to deal with the people and problems from which they were sheltered. Eventually, our children have to make choices in a less protective setting.

We like to congratulate ourselves in having a balanced perspective that has wide appeal. But why does it not draw those who live in walking distance? First, if our lines are drawn so strictly that we cannot work and worship together with those of other Churches of Christ, how can we possibly hope for wider acceptance? Although our particular congregation is accepting, we draw mostly those of the Churches of Christ who like our peculiarities. These little distinguishing details mean little or nothing to those living closest to the building. And I doubt if most of them mean much to the Lord, except as they are made into divisive issues.

Let us look at the early church as a sort of picture to model after rather than using our modern churches as the template and trying to squeeze and warp the early church into our concept. Was one of the first concerns of those converted to Christ the obtaining of a meeting place of their own so they could be separate? Surely not. But you may object, saying that they did not have different persuasions to contend with then. Look again. There is no indication that they abandoned the synagogues. There is no evidence that they rejected Mosaic rituals and initiated the “five acts of worship” in the synagogue immediately after Pentecost. There were divergent elements, but they did not allow segmentation of groups of converted priests, Pharisees, Essenes, and other Jewish sects. Judean Samaritan, and Hellenistic Jews served together. There were permitted no separations because of different convictions and practices of circumcision, observance of days, and eating of meats. Diverse as they might have been, they were united in one body.

Christ, rather than debatable peripheral issues, was their center of unity. “*You were called into the fellowship of his Son,*” Paul reminded Corinthian disciples. So he appealed, “*by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and*

*that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:9-10). In view of that calling into fellowship, Paul further begged that “you lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3). Then he reminded them that there were not different Gods and callings, different faiths and aspirations, and different baptisms directed by different Spirits so as to make them into different bodies. Therefore, there could be no justifiable cause for their rejecting each other to form different bodies.*

Have I been describing the early church as compromising with Judaism and private convictions? They were not compromising. They were maturing beyond those things of lesser or no importance by bearing and forbearing with one another. The process of that maturing would be seen *“until we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, etc.” (v. 11-13).*

The unbending attitude nurtured in many of us has not allowed us to appreciate the loving unselfishness expressed by Paul. To some of us, he has seemed to have been too soft. Read again: *“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law -- though not being myself under the law -- that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law -- not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ -- that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:19-23).*

Surely, Paul was out of his “comfort zone” many times. I must be willing to step out of mine for the sake of compatibility and unity, for people will always have differences of opinion and practice. If I am unwilling to “bear and forbear” in a group where some lift up their hands in prayer and praise, or where women pass the communion trays (a non-scriptural activity for men and women!), or where an octet leads the church in song (song leading is a non-scriptural activity also!), or some lessons are taught by skits, can I deny being more selfish than compatible? I prove to be more concerned with my comfort than with unity. I may have no scriptural objection to those activities, which are just a few of the many examples of our picky details; but I may be uncomfortable with them. So I prefer to be disruptive by demanding what suits me than to accommodate other worshippers for the sake of unity. This applies both directions.

Frankly, I must admit that my efforts to bring people together in a true community church, where we drop all our denominational names and work together simply as disciples of Christ, have never gotten past the stage of wishful thinking. I have

participated in Bible Study Fellowship, however, with which many of you may be familiar also. In it students come from any and all churches, but no denomination is ever mentioned in class. Courses of study are followed with strict rules. Each person may express views on the particular topic but no exchange of argument or debate is permitted. Each man can arrive at his own conclusions, a thing we generally profess to favor but do not practice. Yes, there were times when I would have liked to have had the floor for twenty minutes to push my own view. But I learned to let others reach their own conclusions, a thing against the nature of a preacher! And, you know what? I found those men in the class to be as sincere as I, and some put me to shame by their trust in God and committed lives. After a while, I no longer thought of those fellow students in terms of different church affiliations. We were fellow disciples -- fellow learners -- at different stages in learning and maturity, having developed a strong bond and respect by our association. Through those classes I began to gain a better picture of what a true community church could be.

No time or stage can be envisioned when all will hold common understanding and convictions about the will of God. Though different beliefs in vital doctrines seem insurmountable, we do well to seek commonality rather than to emphasize distinctions. The only unity possible is unity in spite of diversity. That cannot bring organic unity, but we can be centered individually on Christ while respecting one another enough to make the same allowances for others that we wish to be made for us.

My serving with a congregation does not mean that I approve all that is taught and practiced in it. Few of us could find a group in which all agree totally. In fact, there may be no such congregation in existence. If I am unwilling to participate in a church unless I can control its teachings and practices, then I must not call it a community church.

(Cecil Hook; March 2002) []