

Is the Megachurch the New Liberalism?

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The emergence of the megachurch as a model of metropolitan ministry is one of the defining marks of evangelical Christianity in the United States. Megachurches — huge congregations that attract thousands of worshipers — arrived on the scene in the 1970s and quickly became engines of ministry development and energy.

Over the last 40 years, the megachurch has made its presence known, often dominating the Christian landscape within the nation's metropolitan regions. The megachurch came into dominance at the same time that massive shopping malls became the landmarks of suburban consumer life. Sociologists can easily trace the rise of megachurches within the context of America's suburban explosion and the development of the technologies and transportation systems that made both the mall and the megachurch possible.

On the international scene, huge congregations can be found in many African nations and in nations such as Brazil, South Korea, and Australia. In London, where the megachurch can trace its roots back in the 19th century to massive urban congregations such as Charles Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle, a few modern megachurches can be found. For the most part,

however, the suburban evangelical megachurch is an American phenomenon.

Theologically, most megachurches are conservative in orientation, at least in a general sense. In America, a large number of megachurches are associated with the charismatic movement and denominations such as the Assemblies of God. Many are independent, though often loosely associated with other churches. The largest number of megachurches within one denomination is found within the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest non-Catholic denomination.

The emergence of the megachurch was noted by sociologists and church researchers attempting to understand the massive shifts that were taking place in the last decades of the 20th century. Researchers such as Dean M. Kelley of the National Council of Churches traced the decline of the liberal denominations that once constituted the old Protestant "mainline." This decline was contrasted with remarkable growth among more conservative denominations and churches — a pattern traced in Kelley's 1973 landmark book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. Kelley argued that conservative churches were growing precisely because of their strict doctrine and moral teachings. The early megachurches were the leading edge of the growth among conservative churches, especially in metropolitan and suburban settings.

The megachurches were not without their critics. Theologian David Wells leveled a massive critique of the doctrinal minimalism, methodological pragmatism, and managerial culture of many megachurches. Os Guinness accused the megachurch movement of "flirting with modernity" to a degree that put the Christian identity of the massive congregations at risk.

On the other hand, there is evidence that the megachurches have also helped to anchor conservative Christianity within the social cauldron of the United States in recent decades. The evangelistic energies of most megachurches cannot be separated from a deep commitment to conversionist theology and conservative doctrinal affirmations. Within the Southern Baptist Convention, megachurches played an essential role in what became known as the Conservative Resurgence — the movement to return the Convention and its institutions to an affirmation of biblical inerrancy. The most intense years of this controversy (1979-1990) saw the Convention elect an unbroken stream of conservative megachurch pastors as SBC president. In the main, the

megachurches provided the platform leadership for the movement, even as the churches themselves became symbols of denominational aspiration.

Sociologically, the megachurch model faces real challenges in the present and even greater challenges in the future. The vast suburban belts that fueled megachurch growth in the last few decades are no longer the population engines they once were. Furthermore, cultural changes, demographic realities, and technological innovations have led to the development of megachurch modifications such as churches with multiple locations and sermons by video transmission. From the beginning, the megachurches led in the embrace of new technologies, and these now include the full array of digital and social media.

What about theology? This question requires a look at the massive shifts in worldview now evident within American culture. Trends foreseen by researchers such as James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia and others can now be seen in full flower. The larger culture has turned increasingly hostile to exclusivist truth claims such as the belief that faith in Christ is necessary for salvation. One megachurch pastor in Florida recently told me that the megachurches in his area were abandoning concern for biblical gender roles on a wholesale basis. As one pastor told him, you cannot grow a church and teach biblical complementarianism. Even greater pressure is now exerted by the sexual revolution in general, and, more particularly, the question of homosexuality.

The homosexuality question was preceded by the challenge of divorce. By and large, the story of evangelical Christianity in the United States since the advent of legal no-fault divorce has been near total capitulation. This is certainly true of the megachurches, but it is unfair to single them out in this failure. The reality is that the “Old First Church” and smaller congregational models were fully complicit — and for the same basic reason. Holding to strict biblical teachings on divorce is extremely costly. For the megachurches, the threat was being called judgmental, and the perceived danger of failing to reach the burgeoning numbers of divorced persons inhabiting metropolitan areas. For smaller churches the issue was the same, though usually more intimate. Divorced persons were more likely to have family members and friends within the congregation who were reluctant to confront the issue openly. Church discipline disappeared and personal autonomy reigned triumphant.

Is the same pattern now threatening on the issue of homosexuality? No congregation will escape this question, but the megachurches are, once again, on the leading edge. The challenge is hauntingly similar to that posed by divorce. Some churches are openly considering how they can minister most faithfully, even as the public and private challenge of homosexuality and alternative sexual lifestyles has radically transformed the cultural landscape. Other churches, both large and small, are renegotiating their stance on the issue without drawing attention to the changes.

A shot now reverberating around the evangelical world was fired by Atlanta megachurch pastor Andy Stanley in recent days. Preaching at North Point Community Church, in a sermon series known as “Christian,” Stanley preached a message titled “When Gracie Met Truthy” on April 15, 2012. With reference to John 1:14, Stanley described the challenge of affirming grace and truth in full measure. He spoke of grace and truth as a tension, warning that “if you resolve it, you give up something important.”

The message was insightful and winsome, and Andy Stanley is a master communicator. Early in the message he spoke of homosexuals in attendance, mentioning that some had shared with him that they had come to North Point because they were tired of messages in gay-affirming churches that did nothing but affirm homosexuality.

Then, in the most intense part of his message, Stanley told the congregation an account meant to illustrate his message. He told of a couple with a young daughter who divorced when the wife discovered that the husband was in a sexual relationship with another man. The woman then insisted that her former husband and his gay partner move to another congregation. They did move, but to another North Point location, where they volunteered together as part of a “host team.” The woman later told Andy Stanley that her former husband and his partner were now involved as volunteers in the other congregational location.

The story took a strange turn when Stanley then explained that he had learned that the former husband’s gay partner was still married. Stanley then explained that the partner was actually committing adultery, and that the adultery was incompatible with his service on a host team. Stanley told the two men that they could not serve on the host team so long as the one man was still married. He later told of the former wife’s decision not to live in bitterness, and of her initiative to bring the whole new family structure to a

Christmas service. This included the woman, her daughter, her former husband, his gay partner, and his daughter. Stanley celebrated this new “modern family” as an expression of forgiveness.

He concluded by telling of Christ’s death for sinners and told the congregation that Jesus does not condemn them, even if they cannot or do not leave their life of sin.

Declaring the death of Christ as atonement for sin is orthodox Christianity and this declaration is essential to the Gospel of Christ. The problem was that Stanley never mentioned faith or repentance — which are equally essential to the Gospel. There is indeed no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, but this defines those who have acted in repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). As for those who are not in Christ, they stand condemned already (John 3:18).

The most puzzling and shocking part of the message was the illustration and the account of the homosexual couple, however. The inescapable impression left by the account was that the sin of concern was adultery, but not homosexuality. Stanley clearly and repeatedly stressed the sin of adultery, but then left the reality of the homosexual relationship between the two men unaddressed as sin. To the contrary, he seemed to normalize their relationship. They would be allowed to serve on the host team if both were divorced. The moral status of their relationship seemed to be questioned only in terms of adultery, with no moral judgment on their homosexuality.

Was this intended as a salvo of sorts? The story was so well told and the message so well constructed that there can be little doubt of its meaning. Does this signal the normalization of homosexuality at North Point Community Church? This hardly seems possible, but it appeared to be the implication of the message. Given the volatility of this issue, ambiguity will be replaced by clarity one way or the other, and likely sooner than later.

We can only hope that Andy Stanley and the church will clarify and affirm the biblical declaration of the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, even as he preaches the forgiveness of sin in any form through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His affirmation of grace and truth in full measure is exactly right, but grace and truth are not actually in tension. The only tension is our finite ability to act in full faithfulness. The knowledge of

our sin is, in truth, a gift of grace. And grace is only grace because of the truth of what God has done for us in Christ.

And yet, even as we know this is true, we also know that the Christian church has often failed miserably in demonstrating grace to those who struggle with same-sex attractions and those who are involved in homosexual behaviors. We have treated them as a special class of sinners and we have assured ourselves of our moral superiority. The Gospel of Jesus Christ destroys that pretension and calls for us to reach out to all sinners with the message of the Gospel, declaring the forgiveness of sins in Christ and calling them to faith and repentance.

The Gospel is robbed of its power if any sinner or any sin is declared outside its saving power. But the Gospel is also robbed of its power if sin — any sin — is minimized to any degree.

What does Andy Stanley now believe about homosexuality and the church's witness? We must pray that he will clarify the issues so graphically raised in his message, and that he will do so in a way that unambiguously affirms the Bible's clear teachings — and that he will do so precisely because he loves sinners enough to tell them the truth — all the truth — about both our sin and God's provision in Christ. Biblical faithfulness simply does not allow for the normalization of homosexuality. We desperately want all persons to feel welcome to hear the Gospel and, responding in faith and repentance, to join with us in mutual obedience to Christ. But we cannot allow anyone, ourselves included, to come to Christ — or to church — on our own terms.

The current cultural context creates barriers to the Gospel even as it offers temptations. One of those temptations is to use the argument that our message has to change in order to reach people. This was the impetus of theological liberalism's origin. Liberals such as Harry Emerson Fosdick claimed that the Christian message would have to change or the church would lose all intellectual credibility in the modern world. Fosdick ended up denying the Gospel and transforming the message of the Cross into psychology. Norman Vincent Peale came along and made this transformation even more appealing to a mass audience. Fosdick and Peale have no shortage of modern heirs.

Theological liberalism did not set out to destroy Christianity, but to save it from itself. Is the same temptation now evident? The Great Commission, we

must remind ourselves, is not a command merely to reach people, but to make disciples. And disciples are only made when the church teaches all that Christ has commanded, as the Great Commission makes clear.

The megachurches are once again on the leading edge of these questions, but they are not alone. The urgency to reach people with the Gospel can, if the church is not faithful and watchful, tempt us to subvert the Gospel by redefining its terms. We are not honest if we do not admit that the current cultural context raises the cost of declaring the Gospel on its own terms.

Given their size and influence, the megachurches have an outsize responsibility. I am a member and a teaching pastor in a megachurch, and I am thankful for its faithfulness. I know a host of faithful megachurch pastors who are prepared to pay whatever cost may come for the sake of the Gospel. I know that my own denomination was regained for biblical fidelity under the leadership of brave megachurch pastors who used their pulpits to defend the truth. We desperately need these churches as both theological anchors and missiological laboratories.

The times now demand our most careful and biblical thinking, and they demand our clearest conviction matched to a missiological drive to reach the world with the Gospel. We must embrace the truth with the humility of a sinner saved only by grace, but we must embrace it fully.

Once again, the megachurches are on the leading edge. We must pray that they will lead into faithfulness, and not into a new liberalism.