

THE RELIGION MACHINE

By

Curtis Dickinson

In the past three and a half years I have visited and worshiped with scores of different churches. Although different in so many ways, they all seem to depend heavily on organization. In a general sense, they remind me of a great machine, which I call the religion machine.

The religion machine is made up of committees, boards, councils, administrators, directors and a host of professionals with various titles. It moves on wheels — big wheels who run in big circles by plane to speak at banquets and conventions, and little wheels who run in smaller circles by car for invocations and benedictions. There are wires for manipulating certain parts to keep them under control. It is powered by a mixture of faith, psychology and politics and held together with the nuts and bolts of conformity.

Whether large or small, the usual concern is how to make the machine bigger, as it is generally thought that whoever builds the biggest machine is the greatest. Those who are committed to the modern religion machine are, as A. W. Tozer describes it, “Caught up in the monstrous heresy that noise, size, activity, and bluster make men dear to God.”

Such church organizations as we see today have no biblical command or precedent. The word from the Greek which is translated “church” is *ekklesia*. In the first century it was a secular word and meant any assembly of people or any people united by a common bond. When used in connection with Christians, it had no reference to an organization or a building but to the *community* of believers. This means that wherever a Christian is at any time he is a part of the assembly or community of Christ’s people. When one joins Christ in faith, he also joins the Christian assembly of believers throughout the world. The New Testament says nothing about organizing a church.

Terms such as pastor, evangelist, elder, and deacon were not titles indicating an organized structure but descriptive terms referring to the work being done. Today such titles are needed to show who has the authority to run the machine.

We have come a long way from the simplicity of Jesus and the community of believers He founded. As the organization grew more complicated, it also became self-perpetuating. Men sometimes say, “The church is an organism, not an organization,” then they go on building a bigger organization for the purpose of running the organism. Committees appoint committees, and organization begets more organization. The time and energy of members are consumed in meetings to keep the bureaucratic machine running. Personnel are employed to keep track of the operation, to develop mans to meet the payroll, and to build the “plant” to house the machinery. (Believe it or not, “plant” is the exact word commonly used when church leaders speak of the church building complex.) The result is a bureaucracy of officials, with regularly scheduled bureaucratic meetings of the board, the elders, the standing committees, etc.

Of course, all of this is a means to doing the work of God. But one gets to wondering just when the machine will begin to produce the faith instead of more machinery?

When Jesus set forth the prerequisites for the Kingdom, He began with the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the pure in heart, those whose greatest desire is righteousness, and those who are persecuted for Christ's sake. But is this the kind of model that is actually held up before today's church? Just how do these beatitudes fit the leadership of the community's best known churches? When the pulpit committee goes on its search for a preacher, is it looking for the man who is meek and poor in spirit and who mourns over sin in the community? Would such a man make a big hit with the boys down at the Rotary or Kiwanis?

When famous entertainers and powerful and wealthy people fit into the congregation much easier than the penniless widow or the unemployed laborer, the church has become only a religion machine, with a form of godliness, rather than the body of Christ.

"Church Growth" has become big business. There are seminars, conventions, books by the thousands, periodicals, retreats and who know how many professionals, all aimed at making the church grow. Men are flying back and forth across the continent, even across the ocean, telling church staffs how to make the church grow. And you can be sure that those who earn their living in this way are not going to try to change the system. The object is not to reform it nor to correct it but to make it bigger.

The modern church machine has one test for everything — numerical and financial success. To gain this success, great programs are staged with the best performers available, from charismatic speakers who can sway an audience with emotional stories to rock concerts. A local church recently presented the musical, "The Music Man," a theatrical which ridicules morality and chastity and glorifies humanism. But it is entertaining, and that's the way to make the church grow.

Church growth requires an attractive building, in a prominent location, with all the latest conveniences and luxuries. The amount of money now invested in elaborate church edifices throughout the country is in the hundreds of billions. In some that I have checked out the amount allotted for benevolence is less than one-tenth the building budget for the same year. I couldn't find this in the list that begins, "For I was hungry and you gave me to eat: I was thirsty... (etc.)" (Matt. 25:34-45).

It is strange indeed that, in a day when architecture and sculpture were at their best, the apostles and other Christians had no use for them as a means of "attraction" to the church. Instead, they used the truth. They had no machinery to maintain so had time for learning and telling others about the things of life — eternal life. The power of salvation, said Paul, is the gospel.

Promoters of today's religion machine hold that the greater the organization the greater it can serve the community. The fact is that the greater the organization the more the demands upon the members to serve it. Untold numbers of men enter the ministry with the intention of humbly serving God but spend much of their lives in frustration from having to serve the organization and keeping the machine oiled.

While its builders remind us that the machine is only a means to the end, it is often hard to keep the end in view, so prominent is the machinery. It would not be too much to say that many idolize the organization. No wonder that, with the churches showing the greatest membership and financial growth in history, we now have the worst crime record in the world. Often the machine is guided by motivational research instead of the Spirit of God and is concerned with pleasing men rather than with pleasing God. It

infects others with its style, program and activities but does not bring them to repentance. The foam rubber cushions are not for the knees.

The “body of Christ” is not a machine nor an organization but the people for whom He died, each one a temple of His Spirit. The glory of the assembly of which he wrote has only to do with the holiness of Christians and nothing to do with their physical beauty and certainly nothing to do with the building in which they meet.

The Bible does not prohibit organizing the assembly and building expensive structures. I have worked in such organizations most of my life and have helped in their building programs. The question is, to what extent has this practice been an improvement over the simplicity of the early Christian community, which spread the gospel worldwide in the first century? With our elaborate system of highly trained professionals and million dollar edifices, are we doing a better job of serving God and making disciples than are the oppressed of China or Russia?

The marvel is that, although we have complicated the community Christ established, there are still the many who manage to keep their lives focused on Christ and His purpose, not because of the machinery, but in spite of it.

Christ has all authority in His assembly and has given no authority to the clergy nor to any other leaders. He does not work through a bureaucracy but through people in whom He abides, through relationships of those who believe the gospel. This is faith working through love and the *ekklesia* of Christ.

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