

Harvest Church



The question came at me from multiple sides in the past months: what is one to think of Harvest Bible Chapel?? For three consecutive Saturdays in May (10, 17 & 24) I travelled to Oakville to take in the Saturday evening service – advertised as identical to the 9:00 AM & 11:15 AM services on Sunday. On the basis of those visits, plus some investigation via the internet, I offer the following observations for your interest in this *Bit to Read*.

God-centered

The first Saturday I attended was Mother’s Day weekend, and so the Pastor welcomed us by drawing attention to mothers and then urging a thumping cheer for mothers in the congregation – each of them God’s special gift. A rousing cheer followed. He added that we were in for a wonderful and exciting “baptism weekend” where seven people would by God’s grace be joined to the church through their profession of faith in Jesus Christ. After prayer for mothers we were handed over to the worship leader, who with his band sang songs pointing up the greatness and majesty of God Almighty. The words of the lyrics were projected on massive screens, and we were invited to sing along: praise to almighty God.

Baptisms

After three or four such songs, the worship leader directed a prayer of praise to God on account of His unchanging greatness, thanking Him for the privilege we have through Jesus Christ to praise His name. Thereafter the pastor introduced from the baptism tub the first of three candidates who were to be baptized. With each he pointed out that embracing the gospel of redemption through Jesus Christ is God’s gracious work in human hearts. He explained that to be baptized is to say that one has died with Christ, has been buried with Christ, and been raised with Him to new life. After a testimony from the first candidate recounting his gratitude for what God did for him and extolling God on account of His boundless grace, he was baptized through immersion in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The second candidate and the third similarly directed words of praise and gratitude to the Lord God for His mercy in saving undeserving persons as they were. The pastor made a specific point of emphasizing that these baptisms symbolized the candidates’ resolution to follow Jesus Christ, their new Lord and Savior. Further praise followed under the leadership of the band, with words of confidence-in-God projected for us to follow along and join in singing.

After the baptisms the screens told us of the work of the Lord through Harvest Bible Chapel, be it in mission work in Africa, be it in the Pregnancy Crisis Centre in Hamilton, etc. Those wanting or needing extra prayer (or extra prayer time with others) were invited to come to church an hour before any given service to pray in one of the allotted family prayer rooms.

After the collection bags had passed through the sanctuary, the band again led in songs of praise to Jesus who alone can make life new in us.

The following two Saturdays followed a similar format, be it that the baptisms themselves were replaced with notices on the screens about the importance of baptism, what one needed to do to be baptized, and a number of testimonies from persons who had been baptized.

Sermons

In the three services I attended I heard two different preachers deliver sermons on Isaiah 11:1-9 (about the branch from Jesse's stump), Isaiah 42:1-9 (about the merciful servant who makes all things new), and Mark 5:1-20 (about the casting out of the demons and the drowning of the pigs). All three sermons were Biblical in content, reflected an acceptable depth of study, were distinctly Christ-centered, were applied well to the congregation, and were very well presented. I understand now why one hears positive things in our midst about Harvest Bible Chapel. The interested can listen to the sermons via the internet; visit the Harvest Oakville website, and follow the links to the sermons. I noted that during the sermon attention to the preaching was good, and numerous were taking notes.

A prayer followed each sermon, thanking God for His amazing power and mercy in Jesus Christ. The band then led us in a further song that picked up an element of the sermon's message, after which the pastor wished us a blessed week, and dismissed us. Many left the meeting hall, others lingered in the pews to reflect or chat or pray, and elders were on hand in front of the stage for those who wished some follow up conversation.

Man-centered

As I reflected in the days that followed on what I'd heard and witnessed, I became increasingly convinced that these God-centered services were constructed and presented in a man-centered way. Consider the following:

Communication

The 'communication' in this worship service was very heavily tilted in one direction. Communication, of course, is what happens when two people are together; they talk back and forth. In a church service God and His people meet together, with each saying something to the other and the other responding. The Bible reading, for example, is God speaking to us, prayer is us speaking to God, the sermon is God speaking to us, song is us speaking to God, etc.

In the services I attended, the emphasis was very heavily on people speaking. Statistics are not everything, but it's telling nevertheless that in each of the three services I attended it was not till past the 30-minute mark that we first heard a single word from God. Prior to that point, people were praising God in song and prayer, and people were telling people about what God had done in their lives (eg, the testimonies at baptism) and what God was doing among other people (be it mission, be it Pregnancy Centre, etc). This differs from the historic understanding of the Church about God's will concerning public worship: "I diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word..." (Lord's Day 38). Being taught, listening to God speak, is distinctly primary.

Humility....

The doctrine contained in the songs and in the sermons was Biblical. It was encouraging to hear the Harvest preachers speak plainly about the infinite majesty and power of the Lord our God, and speak clearly too about the glorious redeeming work of Jesus Christ. The flip side of that coin, however, is that we are weak – and so need God's almighty power; we are

sinful – and so need His forgiving grace. It was striking that in song and in sermon –and in prayer too– precious little mention was made of weakness and sin.

This was appealing to me. But it also contrasted with the sense of “detesting” and “humbling ourselves before God” that characterizes Biblical thinking. To live and die in the joy of the gospel caught in Lord's Day 1 –I belong to Jesus Christ my faithful Savior (talk about gospel!)– I need to know “*first*, how great my sins and misery are; second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery...” (Lord's Day 1.2). This failure to speak on how great my sins and misery *are* left the grace somewhat hollow, so that what was left was excitement or hype instead of gratitude. I might add: skillful use of lighting and sound effects augmented the sense of hype.

Where is the gospel?

This leads me to my final and most pressing concern. As I said, the glory of the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ was much emphasized, and well described. I was very thankful for that. But my sense was very much that this delightful gospel was set at a distance from the hearer. The obligation of the hearer was now to get oneself to the gospel, and embrace it as your own.

There is, of course, truth in that need to embrace the gospel. Paul set forth the gospel for the Corinthian Christians and then implored them to “be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). That’s why the church insists in Lord's Day 23.60 that each person needs to “accept this gift with a believing heart,” and do so time and again (Lord's Day 31.84).

The problem is, though, that God has not set the gospel at a distance from me; He has instead already claimed me to be His child by covenant – and spelled that out to me in holy baptism. For David the glories of the gospel lay not at a distance from David so that he had to get himself to the gospel to make it his own; instead, he could confidently say, “the LORD *is* my shepherd” (Ps 23). He could dare to describe God as *his* God because the Lord had claimed him for Himself in His covenant of grace, signified in his circumcision. For the same reason the Church has taught its members to confess, “I ... *belong* ... to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ,” who “fully paid for all my sins..., and has set me free from all the power of the devil” (Lord's Day 1). We dare day by day to call God ‘Father’, and dare in the face of our sins to embrace the gospel of forgiveness, and dare in our brokenness to say that we are heirs to eternal life because God has promised this wealth to us in His covenant claim upon us. The gospel is not ‘over there’ in the sense that I need to move myself to the gospel; on God’s authority the gospel is actually *for me now*, and so I need daily to live with that reality and embrace it.

This point gets to the heart too of Harvest’s insistence on adult baptism. Baptism at Harvest is not God making His covenant with you (so that your sins are washed away); it is rather your profession of faith, whereby you indicate that you are committed to God. That’s a distinct impoverishment of the wealth of Scripture.

To be sure, there is a way in which I can justify Harvest’s insistence on adult baptism and understand that they leave the gospel at a distance from the hearer. This church, after all, expects outsiders or unbelievers in church each Sunday, and wants to set before them the need to respond to the gospel. I understand that. But again, over the centuries the church has learned from God’s Word what a *church* is; a church “is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by his blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Article 27, *Belgic Confession*). A church is not characterized by its visitors, but by its membership – and those members need to be reminded in life’s doubts and struggles that they “belong” to their faithful Savior. That’s why the preaching needs to drive home the glorious message that the gospel is actually for each believer, and for the household belonging to the believer.

In sum

I came away thinking that there definitely are things I could learn from Harvest Bible Chapel. I mention specifically the need to excel in the preaching. I appreciated the enthusiasm and the skill with which the preachers I heard delivered their message. I appreciated that these men were in step with what's going on in our Canadian culture, and spoke as men who lived in the present decade, in tune with their hearers. (This, by the way, is something equally true of many more noted neo-Calvinist preachers across North America.)

I rejoice that Christ is proclaimed in Harvest Bible Chapel. But the Scripture is richer than I heard there. By God's grace our heritage (both in confessions and in how our church services are put together) capture more of that richness than I experienced at Harvest. That's why I pity those who have made the move from the Canadian Reformed Churches to Harvest Bible Chapel. At the same time I think we are obligated to excel in drawing out continually the wealth of the heritage we've received, especially in the preaching – lest folk in our midst are tempted to follow others who have left.

And ... I think we should cast about for ways to enrich Harvest with a better understanding of what it means that almighty God reaches out to sinners with His covenant of grace. A better understanding would change their liturgy, their practice in relation to baptism, and especially some emphases in their preaching.

C Bouwman
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