The Problem with the Megachurch

By Barry L. Clark, 2020

I have, intermittently and occasionally, made references, usually as half-serious jabs, about the seeker-sensitive megachurch movement (see definition of term). It is, however, not a simple joke. There are many absurd aspects to the entire movement, and oftentimes one can only but laugh at absurdity. That notwithstanding, this is all dangerous. (see why I write about the megachurch)

First a caveat. I will not suggest that the megachurch movement all by itself is the thing that will destroy organized Christianity in the US. The Protestant denominations were doing a fine job of that themselves. (B L Clark, 2019c) The Presbyterians and the Methodist succumbed to liberal theology and social gospel a long time ago, recent splits within the Presbyterian church and the inevitable Methodist split notwithstanding. The Baptist recovered solid theology in the conservative reformation of the 70s and 80s but error began to slip back in with pop authors and strange 40-day programs. Attendance in all of those churches was falling, by the 1990s they seemed to be dying, stale and irrelevant.   Authentic Christianity has been in decline for certain, separate from the megachurch movements adverse impact. (B L Clark, 2019a)

I am not here to argue that the old way is The Way because it was the old way. I understand how the American church and worship styles changed in the major Awakenings. I may personally prefer liturgy, solemnity, old hymns and order but that is just personal. My argument against the megachurch movement is not based upon the style of worship I prefer.

Summary (very short version): The big brain (Peter Drucker) behind the megachurch movement was a man that grew up in Austria exposed to thinkers and philosophers of or influenced by a branch of philosophy that gave the world nihilism, fascism, communism, and socialism. In his own writing, he expressed his belief that mankind needed a new way, that both communism and capitalism were insufficient. His concept to achieve this was communities of communities, lead by a leader and who lead leaders, all following a plan. He believed the community was more important than the individual. He believed essentially that fascism went wrong when it failed to account for the spiritual.

After attempting to implement his plan in American industry through 'plant communities' he focused his efforts on the churches. Drucker was key in the formation and growth of the dominant organization that helps megachurches grow and provides templates and plans to megachurch pastors.

At the heart of all of this is the notion that the individual is less important than the community, that leaders must be followed, that the community must be served.

Fascist you say?

The 'F' word is a bit overused in our common dialogue. It often is just a word applied to anyone else that tells someone they cannot do what they want or perhaps an insult applied to a conservative on Twitter. It is overused, and that is a shame, because The Third Way, fascism is a real ideology. People will argue that Drucker wrote a critique of the Nazis in 1936 before leaving Austria and that his website states he was neither a fascist nor a Nazi. I would agree that Drucker thought both the Italian Fascist and German Nazis got it all wrong and that because of the stigma attached to the word Drucker would never claim or want to be labeled as a Fascist. This, however, does not change the fact that his ideas, particularly about the leader model, the individual, and community and societal order were close to fascist thinking. He grew up in a connected home, his father had as dinner guest the same intellectuals that the fascist looked to. He read the same foundational philosophers and agreed with their thoughts. Drucker was certainly of the same intellectual cloth as the original fascist thinkers. That this is a true statement no more makes him a Nazi or aligns him with what the Germans and Italians did to the ideology than to claim that Bernie Sanders, a socialist, should be directly associated with Stalin's purges. To point out the ideological foundation of Drucker's thought as he conceived of the megachurch method is simply to honestly assess the source of the ideas.

Perhaps Drucker, seeing flaws in capitalism and communism and the flaws in how fascism was implemented in Europe, while still holding to the core ideas that formed fascism, sought a Fourth Way. An improved and rebranded fascism that included the spiritual. His very words hint at that without using the 'F' word.

Proof in the Pudding

Since we overuse fascism, and we have become so skeptical of ideas and information that contradicts what we have come to believe as knowledge, I suggest the following. Look directly at how the megachurches behave and are organized. Despite the independence of them all, they are fascinatingly similar in several areas. They are similar because they share the techniques and methods passed along by The Leadership Network, the organization Drucker so influenced.

Leader Driven: Drucker called these 'pastoral churches', he argued that the main pastor should be more of a leader than a minister. He called this the Leadership Principle, but it has much in common with the *fuhrer* principle from Germany - a central leader that casts the vision and layers of subordinate leaders that manage, execute and get the people to act. As 'independent' churches most megachurches are ultimately accountable to only themselves - in practical application, this means the senior pastor and his small specially selected and appointed board.

There is much less transparency in the megachurch than most traditional denominations. The congregation does not vote on big issues or on the leadership. Accounting and finances are generally presented in much less detail. Many megachurch members have never met their senior pastor, he is certainly not a minister to them.

The leader principle extends all the way to the personal (relational in MC speak) level from senior pastor to satellite pastors to community pastors and finally small-group leaders.

Sounds like solid organizational design and nothing more you say. I mean, after all, Drucker was called the 'father of modern management" you would expect such in an organization he helped shape, no harm there, right? Maybe.

Community: The small-group forms the basis of the organization. All major decisions of the individual should be taken to the small-group. Megachurches teach that it is a sin of pride to take on major decisions outside of community. The small-group is the central feature of the megachurch, not the individual. All movement, progress, and momentum begins in the small-group. People share their dark secrets and confession to their small-group, items that are often used as subtle tools of control when necessary. Participation in the small-group is a foundational requirement.

Community is above family in the megachurch, the family is subordinate to the community just as the individual. That is unless you are in the inner circle. The children's and teenager's small-groups feature youngster 'leaders' leading kids through discussions of 'parent wounds', demonstrating that the group has answers and help where the family fails. Husbands and wives are not immune to meddling in their marital business.

Those that leave the megachurch seldom say anything publicly that is bad about their former church, and many exhibit an irrational level of fear and anxiety when they come into contact with their former leaders. There is a degree of social control present that is difficult to articulate, but easy to observe when you look.

Service: In the megachurch service, oftentimes service done for the church itself, not for directly for those outside, comes near to a doctrinal position. I have heard megachurch people claim in anger than an old grandma that lived a faithful Christian life could not be a Christian because she does not 'serve'. This phenomenon is near, if it has not already become, heresy.

Oaths: One does not simply join a megachurch, you sign a contract, a membership covenant. All of them contain variations of the following (just two sections from a random contract):

UNITY
GUARD MY TONGUE FROM DESTRUCTIVE CRITICISM AND GOSSIP, SUBMIT TO THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH ELDERS AND APPOINTED LEADERS, AND WORK FOR THE GOOD OF ALL MEMBERS.

PARTICIPATION
REGULARLY PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE OF […] CHURCH BY ATTENDING WEEKLY WORSHIP SERVICES, ENGAGE IN BIBLICAL COMMUNITY, AND SERVE THOSE WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.

Members sign this, and sometimes the church requires members to sign again at random intervals, for reasons. On the face of it, these seem like commonsensical items. Preachers have admonished congregants for gossiping for years. Of course, a person ought to participate. However, the meanings of this covenant, as evidenced by how the megachurch interprets their meanings is very different than innocent words.

- Don't agree with a plan or a program? Shut up or get disciplined for not working in community to follow God's plan.

- Refuse to date the right person, make the 'right' life choices or live in community, then you agree to face discipline from folks you did not elect.

- Refuse to 'serve', in community? See above, you agree to face discipline.

NewSpeak: Megachurches have almost universally adopted terms that are routinely peppered into almost every sentence and conversation. 'Intentional', 'relational', 'authentic' and others. These terms, what folks schooled in megachurch theology would claim are extracted Biblical concepts, because the words certainly do not exist in any accurate translation of the Bible. Most megachurch members can explain these terms much more fluently than theological concepts. This is all very disturbing and perhaps dangerous. It seems a form of language control. At the very least it demonstrates the theological weakness of the megachurch teaching method. At the worst, it is a form of language conformity.

Finally,

The Parking Lot: If you are unconvinced with the presentation of subtle ties to fascism in the megachurch go visit one and attempt to just willy-nilly go park where you want. You will find a group of men, those too old to 'serve' inside anymore lined up to tell you exactly where to go and park from the moment you turn off the public road. Yes, I get it, the mega in megachurch means a lot of people. Sure, this seems efficient, got it. Hitler made the trains run on time too - I do not want to take the analogy too far, but fascism is designed for efficiency and compliance. There is more to the parking lot than even the parking lot guys understand.

<u>The Bottom-line</u>. I am not saying megachurch pastors are evil or have bad intent, not on the whole. I am not suggesting their small board meetings are conducted in dark rooms with nefarious intentions. I am suggesting that at the root of the ideology and methodology there exists the elements of bad philosophy, bad philosophy that has in other cases gone very wrong. Group-think, language conformity, oaths, control, lack of transparency combined with shallow topic theology is not Biblical Christianity.

The megachurch was born of Continental philosophical anti-rationalism. In the megachurch, this translates into: (Rosebrough)
- Anti-Doctrinalism (theologically shallow)
- Deeds NOT Creeds (service sneaks in here as a form of Justification)
- Head knowledge vs. Heart Knowledge (emotion-based, feeling it instead of knowing it; entertainment)
- Unity of the Faith Community (community over the individual and families)

Druckerism and the Megachurch
From: [The Rise of Absurdity in Western Philosophical and Political Views](#) (Barry L. Clark, 2020)

Peter Drucker, essentially the key founder of the megachurch movement, grew up exposed to the great thinkers of the German school (Continental Philosophy) during his youth in Austria. In his own writing, he expressed a view that community was more important than the individual (Neoplatonism) and an affinity for Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. He expressed ideas about the failures of capitalism and communism and suggested a third way, in words that echoed that of Italian Fascist Giovanni Gentile. The creation of a new "noneconomic society" was Drucker's lifelong project. His life's work was focused on finding a way to build community structures, focused on the common good that could change society. Part of his plan was based upon the leadership principle, taken from the German model of the *fuhrer* principle, one leader cast the vision and subordinate leaders ensure the community executes it. Essentially Drucker found both capitalism and socialism to be flawed, they could not solve poverty. He thought Fascism had gone wrong because it ignored the spiritual. He believed a noneconomic system built upon communities within communities accountable to a leader who was accountable to a leader was the answer, an improved version of Fascism.

Drucker tried to implement his ideas in industry in America. He is perhaps most famous for being the creator of modern management. He found that factories were insufficient to implement his community of communities plan as people simple moved too often.

In 1990 he wrote *Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Practices and Principles* and changed his focus from business to nonprofits, specifically churches and more specifically what he called pastoral churches. In a Forbes interview in the 90's, he said, "The community … needs a

community center. … I'm not talking religion now, I'm talking society. There is no other institution in the American community that could be the center." he told Forbes that pastoral megachurches are "surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last thirty years." Drucker advised "you must change the primary role of pastor from minister to leader", harkening back to the leadership (*fuhrer*) principle. (Rosebrough)

The Leadership Network, an organization that claims to mentor thousands of pastors and hundreds of churches states on their website, "Leadership Network would not be the same–in fact, might not exist at all - were it not for Peter Drucker". (Network, 2005) A quick search of their site, conference attendees and participants demonstrates it is difficult to find any randomly selected megachurch pastor that has not participated in some way. (Steinfels, 2005) The corporate, business model of 'doing church' was created by Peter Drucker, because he saw it as a way to implement his vision.

The next time your megachurch pastor or one of his underlings relays the story of how it all started with just a handful in someone's house or a bar, remember Drucker. A few of them probably did start it, and maybe they met in a bar or a house, but it was much more like a board meeting than a very small church hoping to grow to thousands in a few years. That little groups read Drucker, participated in The Leadership Network, did market research and bought a mailing list. It was a lot less authentic, much more programmatic and planned than the organic story people recall so fondly.

So, what of these churches that the Druckerites have helped build, what are they really all about. Firstly, they are anti-rational, emotional rather than reasoned. Heart-knowledge over head-knowledge. Deeds over creeds. There is no messy theology or doctrine to scare you away or confuse, two thousand years of Christian thought and writing out the window. Secondly, but perhaps most importantly, it is about the collective, not you. Everything is done in community, decisions, confession, service, discipline. Everything follows the plan, the plan from the guy on the big screen you probably have never met.

Community, service to the community, a leadership plan and everyone on board with the plan. For many it begins in the parking lot during a visit, there are people there to tell you exactly where to park - getting people on board with the plan early in the experience. If you join you will be assigned to a small group, so will your kids. The small group is where small *furhers* help ensure the plan and the community are taken care of. Your small group is, of course, a member of a larger community, the satellite campus, with another underling leader. You see your main leader on the large screen but he never minsters to anyone, most never meet him. To join, you were probably required to sign a membership covenant, one that says you will submit to disciple and follow the leaders. Major life choices must be brought to the community. Your children will be pulled away from you as they are forced to talk about 'parent wound' in their small group to their leader that is barely past being a kid themselves. The family is an

impediment to the collective, it will be praised and talked about but in reality, it is subordinate. You may come to believe that service to the community somehow relates to your salvation. You will notice that everyone speaks in code, peppering sentences with authentic, intentional and relational, and of course community. Basically, once you join you become part of the collective and give up being part of yourself.

If you leave the church, you will be shamed and ostracized. Most that leave never say anything bad publicly about the church or their experience. The community still has a hold and still instills fear of shunning on them.

None of that meshes very well with authentic, orthodox, genuine Christianity and that is because it does not. Very little of what megachurches focus most of their efforts on is biblical Christianity. This is not to say that many Christians do not attend these churches, nor that the leaders did not have good intentions when they started out. However, power corrupts, and the power from a community focused on the community, with leaders accountable to nobody is pretty intoxicating. In the last few years some notable megachurch leaders have fallen, and some entire churches of thousands have collapsed overnight.

In some few cases, megachurches have slipped into outright and atrocious heresy. The December 2019 Bethel, raise Olive from the dead tragedy comes to mind. Oddly enough, even after outright heresy and apostasy like that groups like The Gospel Coalition, the 9s, 9Mark, and the Leadership Network fail to disavow them. Every megachurch still associated with the Druckerites is guilty by association with that tragic heresy related to that little dead girl and her family.

Megachurches in Druckerite model are the fastest-growing segment of Christianity in America. The leaders of these churches are accountable to nobody but their small hand-picked boards. Nobody is there to ensure they maintain any sort of orthodoxy in doctrine or theology - they have dispensed with all that just as the Postmoderns have gotten rid of all the parts of modernity and history that confound them.

Drucker thought a better, more spiritual version of fascism, with communities of communities, was the future for mankind and he worked to see that through, churches, megachurches were his vehicle. One does not have to be around one of these operations long, not with your eyes open, looking past the fog machine and disco lights, to see authoritarian behavior. Reason tells anyone that walks in that something is not right - they keep you by suspending reason and playing to emotion.

Left unchecked, particularly considering the collapse of all the other protestant denominations, it is not hard to see, absent divine intervention, how within ten years there will be much

Christianity left in any of these churches if they can hold out ten years, without accountability and built upon bad ideology, there is no way they can survive twenty. (B L Clark, 2019b)

Credit to Chris Rosebrough and Fighting for the Faith and his work on this subject. See his video presentation, Resistance is Futile.

See Also:
Why I Write About the Megachurch
The Megachurch Defined
The Megachurch Explained
All Megachurch posts

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