

DAVID E. EAGLE

Historicizing the Megachurch

Abstract

The dominant view of megachurches claims they represent a new religious form, born in the United States in the 1970s and 80s. Contrary to this position, this research demonstrates that megachurches enjoy a long history in Protestantism. An important example from the 16th Century Huguenot architect Jacques Perret reveals an early Protestant vision for a large, multi-functional worship space. Soon after, this vision became realized in bricks and mortar. Revivalism and the Institutional Church Movement of the 19th and early 20th Centuries provide further connections between megachurches and the past. Revivalism provided the motivation for Protestants to go out and reach the masses, and the Institutional Church Movement provided the infrastructure to attract, convert, and nurture them. The demographic shifts that occurred following WWII led to the proliferation of churches in post-war America. This meant that large churches became increasingly visible, but journalists and social commentators mistook their increase in prevalence for lack of historical precedent. Pastors and other leaders, capitalizing on the appeal of innovation, reinforced this view. This research offers an important corrective that helps situate megachurches in the United States in their proper context.

The megachurch burst into the American consciousness in the 1980s. Megachurches differed from their predecessors by offering their participants a single organization to meet their spiritual, emotional, educational, and recreational needs. In 1989, the vanguard of the megachurch movement, 37 year-old Bill Hybels, said, "We're on the verge of making kingdom history . . . doing things a new way for a whole new generation."¹ A 33 year-old Rick Warren, pastor of the then 5,000 member (now 20,000+ member) Saddleback Community Church echoed similar sentiments:

There's a trend all across America moving away from the small neighborhood churches to larger regional-type churches. It's the same phenomenon with malls replacing the mom and pop stores on the corner. People will drive past all kinds of little shopping centers to go to a major mall, where there are lots of services and where they meet their needs. The same is true in churches today in that people drive past dozens of little churches to go to a larger church which offers more services and special programs.²

Journal of Social History (2015), pp. 1–16

doi:10.1093/jsh/shu109

© The Author 2015. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.

For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com.

Writing in *Christianity Today*, Lyle Schaller, a prominent evangelical spokesman for the megachurch movement, proclaimed, "The emergence of the 'mega-church' is the most important development of modern Christian history. You can be sentimental about the small congregation, like the small corner grocery store or small drugstore, but they simply can't meet the expectations that people carry with them today."³ This echoes the well-known marketing consultant Peter Drucker's claim that megachurches "are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years."⁴

Several historians agree that megachurches lack precedent. Take Patrick Allitt. He sees them as an innovation of post-WWII America. "America's new megachurches," he argues ". . . were designed to provide an entire way of life, including schools, gymnasiums, dining halls, study groups settings, therapy sessions, aerobics classes, bowling alleys, and sometimes even Christian-themed shopping."⁵ "Megachurch," Martin Marty says simply, "is . . . an invention of the Age of Greed."⁶

Critics of the megachurch followed a similar line. Gustav Niebuhr, grandson of the famous theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, and long-time religion writer for the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*, summarizes their emergence as follows, "A shift of power and influence is slowly, but profoundly, changing the way many of the nation's 80 million Protestants worship. Since the 1980s, megachurches have gathered tens of thousands of worshipers into their folds and millions of dollars into their collection plates, becoming in the process new centers of Protestant influence."⁷ In her biting 1984 critique of fundamentalist culture Carol Flake writes, "By the beginning of the eighties, the Lord's business had become big business . . . The phantom congregations of the nation's TV preachers had become rooted in elaborate institutions and ordinary churches had grown into Super Churches."⁸ With a similar axe to grind, William MacNair states,

In the panorama of religious events in the United States, the mega-church is something new. Nothing quite like it has appear before. True enough, it did have precursors . . . But . . . these very large mega-churches are a "new kid on the block" among religious organizations in the United States.⁹

In this article, I demonstrate that it is wrong to consider megachurches a new organizational form that emerged in the 1970s. Even though arguments in support of the novelty of the modern megachurch receive near-universal endorsement, a careful analysis reveals that megachurches are nothing new. The modern megachurch has emerged through a long process of evolution. The megachurch movement of the 1970s and 1980s has roots that tap deep into the soil of Protestant religion—especially, but not exclusively, in revivalism and the Institutional Church Movement of the 19th and early 20th Centuries.¹⁰ But their history, largely forgotten, goes back much farther. Among Protestants, the impulse to build what today we term megachurches stretches into the 16th Century.

A number of inter-related forces created historical amnesia about the predecessors of the modern megachurch. First and foremost, megachurch promoters lived with a sense of manifest destiny—to them, their churches did represent something new, innovative and unprecedented. Newness and innovation have long-possessed an enduring sense of appeal to middle and upper-middle class Americans—the group to which these pastors wished to appeal.¹¹ Additionally,

by marketing themselves as a “new social phenomenon,” megachurches received a great deal of media attention. Even though much of the publicity took on a negative tenor, bad publicity is still publicity. The media took the proclamations about the unprecedented nature of megachurches at face value. This stemmed partially from ignorance about religion on the part of the reporter;¹² but more importantly, journalism has long celebrated the sensational and obscured historical precedent in favor of novelty.¹³

Defining Megachurch

Megachurches are big. While some attach a threshold to the number of attenders a megachurch contains—1,500 regular attenders is a popular threshold¹⁴—it is sufficient to say that these are the very largest of the large. According to research analyzing the National Congregations Study, the largest 1 percent of Protestant congregations in the United States attracts 1,000 or more attenders.¹⁵ But beyond simply being big, megachurches share other characteristics. They come out of the Protestant tradition, they offer a multitude of programs tailored to people’s needs, and they frequently aim to achieve broader cultural importance. While most megachurches in America today espouse a conservative theology, this reflects the fact that the dominant form of Christianity today is evangelical in orientation, rather than an essential connection between conservative theology and very large churches.

Even though megachurches in everything but name have a long history in America, the media did not brand them as a distinctive form of religious organization until the 1980s. A collective awakening in the media to the presence of large Protestant congregations occurred in and around 1980. During this time the so-called “church growth” movement began gaining prominence, due in large part to the establishment of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth at Fuller Seminary in 1980. This movement promoted marketing-based approaches to church organization and heralded several signature churches (Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Community Church, included) as purveyors of a new kind of church for a new age. Elmer Towns at Liberty University; Stephen Vaughan at Southwestern Baptist Seminary; and C. Peter Wagner and Carl George at Fuller Seminary all occupied a central role in this movement. In some important ways, the media had put their collective finger on significant changes occurring in Protestant churches. As Mark Chaves points out, since the 1970s and across Protestant denominations people are increasingly found in the largest 1 percent of a denominations’ congregations.¹⁶ Likewise, Thumma and Travis document a steady increase in very large churches. They estimate that in 1970, 50 churches with an attendance of more than 1,500 people existed in the United States but by 2005, that number had grown to more than 1,200. In Thumma and Travis’s words, “while megachurches are not an entirely new phenomenon . . . the rapid proliferation of these churches since the 1970s . . . is a distinctive social phenomenon.”¹⁷ However, we should not confuse increasing prevalence with newness. While megachurches increasingly dot the religious landscape in America, we find evidence of similar ecclesiastical forms throughout Protestant history.

Early Precedents for the Megachurch

The early Protestant reformers criticized established forms of ecclesial organization that emphasized the church building as the primary locus of spiritual activity and contact. John Calvin criticized the Roman Catholic Church for spending large sums of money on opulent buildings, but ignoring the poor. He advocated for two main functions of the church building: as a place for people to come and hear the Word proclaimed, and as a place to receive the Sacraments, rightly administered.¹⁸ The former of these, preaching, became a central concern in Protestant architecture. Writing in 1577, the Protestant reformer Martin Bucer argues,

From the plans of the most ancient temples, and from the writings of the holy fathers, it is well known that among the ancients the position of the clergy was in the middle of the temples, which were usually round; and from that position divine service was so presented to the people that the things recited could be clearly heard and understood by all who were present.¹⁹

Bucer's sentiments had a clear influence both on how early Protestants constructed their worship spaces and on how they conceived of the church.

Driven by the sentiments echoed by Bucer and a desire for cultural influence, it did not take long for Protestants to begin imagining what we would later call the megachurch. The earliest example comes from France. The edict of Nantes (1598) granted Protestants in France the right to legally build and organize churches. Already by 1601, Protestants began dreaming big. The Huguenot architect Jacques Perret provides a dramatic example.²⁰ In his 1601 book, *Des fortifications et artifices, architecture et perspective*,²¹ he draws up plans for an idealized Protestant Temple, shown in Figure 1. It held nearly 10,000 people on its main floor and included two additional balconies. The preacher stood close to the center of the nearly square building to maximize the ability of worshippers to hear the sermon. Three levels of ancillary spaces to accommodate secular and religious purposes surrounded the temple. The roof has the characteristic lantern shape of many Protestant Temples, which amplified the speaker's voice.²²

But Perret's vision encompassed more than a large building. He notes that the auditorium could easily be modified to accommodate town assembly meetings. Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics, who held sacramental views regarding buildings intended for worship, would have balked at the melding of secular and religious purposes in a sanctuary. Speaking of Perret's willingness to dream of a worship space that could be reconfigured as a secular meeting space, one scholar says, "Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the radicalism of the French Reformers."²³ Perret's vision points to the fundamental rethinking about the place and purpose of the building happening in the Reformation, particularly in France. Written around the outside of Perret's temple we find the slogan, "The Christian children of God are his true temple."²⁴ The building is still grand and ornate, but it is no longer the locus of God's activity. This opens up the possibility that the church building can now play an important role in the wider political and cultural sphere.

While Perret's grand Temple was never built, Protestant churches in France adopted similar designs. Many were square or polygonal and had multiple levels

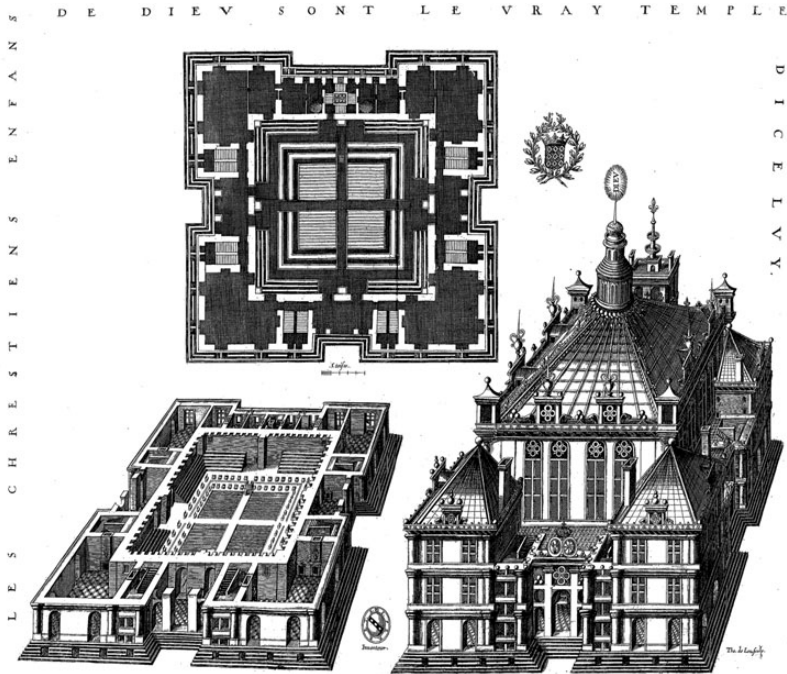


Figure 1. Jacques Perret's Design for a Grand Temple in his idealized city, 1601. Reprinted from Jacques Perret's book *Des Fortifications Et Artifices: Architecture Et Perspective* (Paris, 1601). Public domain.

from which all attenders could hear the sermon. A 1704 collection of Dutch engravings report the Temple at Quevilly attracted 8,000 worshippers, the one at Dieppe, 6,000.²⁵ The Temple near Paris at Charenton and pictured in Figure 2 was perhaps the most famous. It seated several thousand, and was designed by another Huguenot court architect and contemporary of Perret's, Salomon de Brosse, in 1623.²⁶ It is not known if de Brosse and Perret had contact, but striking similarities between their designs exist. These buildings demonstrate an early goal among Protestants to build large structures to accommodate thousands of worshippers and maximize the ability of individuals to both see and hear the leader perform worship.

Revivalism

George Whitefield (1714–1770) played a crucial role in fueling the Protestant impulse to reach the masses using large church buildings. He pioneered a theatrical, engaging form of revival preaching, which attracted crowds of thousands.²⁷ Best known for his open-air meetings, Whitefield also commissioned a number of “Tabernacles” throughout England. While originally built as temporary structures, quickly stone replaced the wooden buildings. Whitefield did not name his buildings “churches” to avoid competition with the Church of England. The

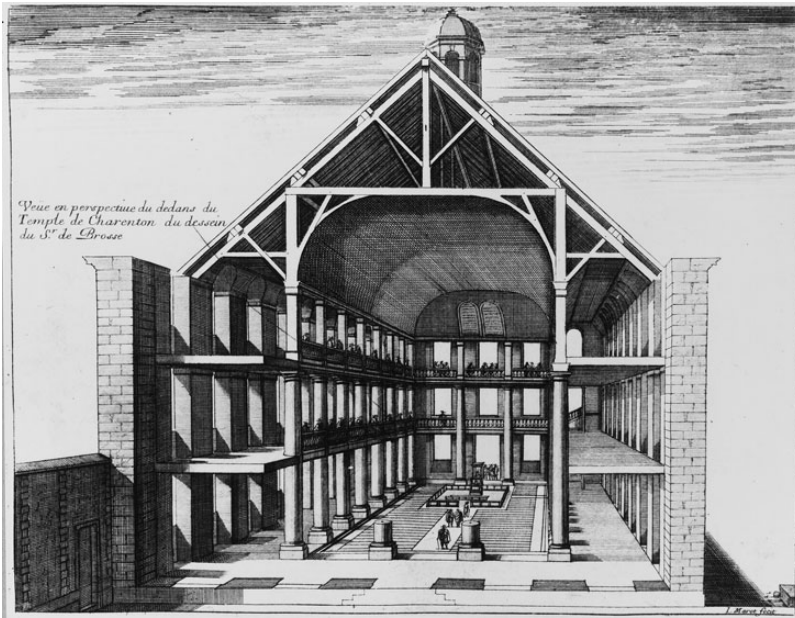


Figure 2. Temple de Charenton, an orthographic drawing by the architect, Salomon de Brosse, c.1623. Used with permission from the Courtauld Institute of Art.

name also evoked images of the tabernacle used by the Israelites during their wanderings (cf. Exodus 25:25) and shared historical continuity with Scottish, Dutch and French Reformed groups.²⁸ Two large Tabernacles, both accommodating several thousand worshippers, made their home in London—the Moorsfields Tabernacle, built in the early 1740s and the Tottenham Court Tabernacle built in the 1750s. These Tabernacles have the characteristic square-design and “lantern-shaped” roof, as opposed to the more traditional long nave and recessed altar of many Anglican churches. This design amplified the speaker’s voice and enabled seating in multiple levels around the speaker.

The famous English non-conformist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, came closest to encapsulating Perret’s vision in bricks and mortar, eventually constructing the largest Protestant church building of his day. In 1853, he arrived in London at the age of nineteen to assume the pulpit of Park Street Baptist Church. His popular preaching attracted huge crowds and by 1861 he successfully oversaw the building of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, with room for 6,000 listeners (the church held multiple Sunday and midweek services). Figure 3 shows the interior of the original building. In continuity with earlier Protestant architecture—compare with the Temple at Charenton in Figure 2—this structure maximizes the ability of the audience to hear the preacher. Spurgeon’s church did not merely serve as a place to hear preaching. It housed a huge Sunday School, a preacher’s college, a popular annual conference, an orphanage and an alms house. One hundred years later—which demonstrates the important place of Spurgeon in the evangelical imagination—a leading fundamentalist journal, *The Moody*



Figure 3. The interior of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, England, 1864. Reprinted from Charles Haddon Spurgeon's book *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London, 1864). Public domain.

Bible Institute Monthly, held up Spurgeon's church as an important exemplar, a point to which I will return below.

The Institutional Church

Developments in the United States mirrored those in Europe. From very early on, American churchmen looked to Europe for their inspiration. Take the Second Great Awakening revivalist, Charles Grandison Finney. In 1836, shortly after renovating the Chatham Theater in New York into a church building, he purpose built a new structure to house the Broadway Tabernacle. It bears a striking resemblance to the "new" megachurches of the 1980s. Many considered Broadway Tabernacle one of the most influential congregations of 19th century America. It seated 2,400, but could accommodate 4,000.²⁹ As Figure 4 shows, it featured a central rotunda and a small stage, which again emphasizes the importance of preaching. It did not serve merely as a place of worship. The congregation rented the sanctuary during the week for various cultural performances; it hosted contemporary debates on women's rights, abolition, and prohibition; and the building housed an extensive ministry to the poor.³⁰ This figure depicts the Tabernacle being used for the distribution of the American Art Union Prizes, again showcasing how from early on in America, using a church building to host high-cultural, and notably secular events, had an accepted place.

The Baptist Temple, built in 1891 in Philadelphia, PA, provides another clear example of the late-20th-century megachurch in 19th-century garb. Standing as a

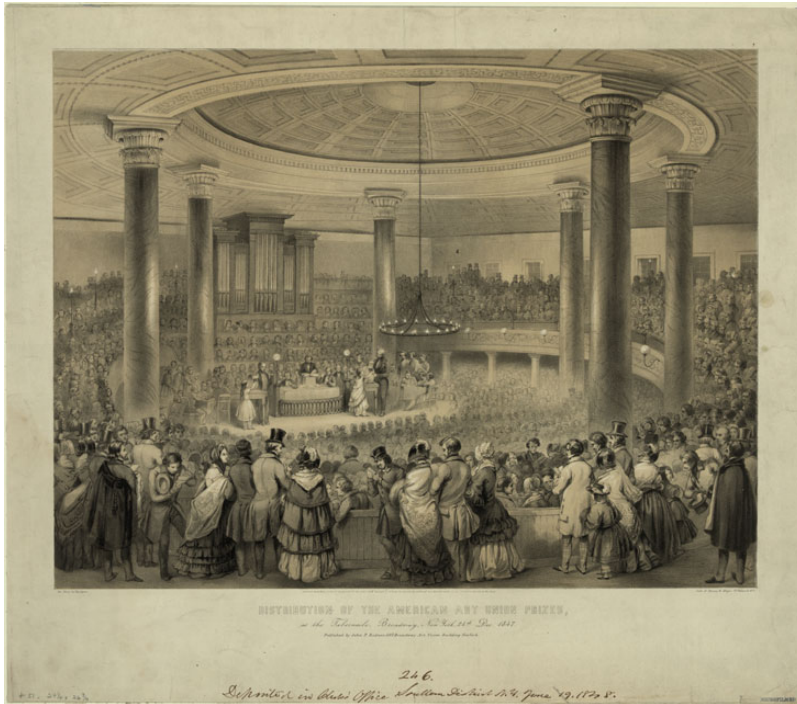


Figure 4. The interior of the Broadway Tabernacle, New York, NY, 1848. Library of Congress. No known restrictions on publication.

leading exemplar of the Institutional Church Movement and seating at least 3,000 (and perhaps as many as 4,500) the church “combined the auditorium church form and multipurpose facility, enabling them to appeal to the urban elite while at the same time fulfilling a commitment, inherited from the revivalists, to promote moral reform and to evangelize the masses.”³¹ The Temple boasted a college; one of the best-equipped gymnasiums in Philadelphia; a nearby cricket field and baseball diamond; an affiliated Hospital (to which the Sunday services were broadcast over special speaking tubes); a separate “Young People’s Church,” which met in the basement and could accommodate 2,000; a large banquet facility; and regular concerts, lectures, debates, and readings in its main sanctuary.³² As Loveland and Wheeler note, “The church’s founder, Russel H. Cornwell, justified the Temple’s sponsorship of ‘entertainments’ on the grounds that the church should use ‘any reasonable means to influence men for good’.”³³

Early 20th Century church building manuals demonstrate that structures like the Baptist Temple occupied a solid place in Protestant thinking about church organization. A 1928 manual remarks that “the church has passed beyond the experimental stage in gymnasium work,” and, “Bowling alleys have been found very popular. Some churches have difficulty in finding sufficient hours to schedule the alleys.”³⁴ Even planning for cutting edge communication technology enters the discussion, “A picture booth for a moving picture machine and stereopticon must

be considered when planning the parish hall or gymnasium. Several rooms should be equipped with shades so that they may be darkened during the daytime. Provide convenient storage space of the visualization equipment.”³⁵ In 1948, another manual states, “Swimming is an increasingly popular form of recreation. In one institutional church in a crowded city section, the total attendance in the swimming pool in one week was 1,400.”³⁶

Early 20th Century Developments

And while more formal Gothic designs became more popular after WWI, Protestants continued to build large worship spaces that maximized the ability of participants to hear and see the drama unfolding on the stage. The Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, CA stands as perhaps the finest witness to the continuing attraction of the huge, multipurpose church to Protestants. The Temple housed prayer rooms, broadcast facilities and venues from which to run social-service agencies. The desire to reach the masses with the gospel message and to provide a mission outpost to influence the broader society stood behind the Temple’s founder Aimee Semple McPherson.³⁷ The sanctuary, built in 1923, is pictured in Figure 5. Angelus Temple continued one of the dominant forms of Protestant sanctuary design—a large, multi-galleried worship space to accommodate thousands that still maintains an intimate focus on the stage.



Figure 5. The interior of the Angelus Temple, Los Angeles, c. 1930. International Church of the Four Square Gospel, Heritage Division, used with permission.

A clear ecclesiological vision anchored Angelus Temple and other similar congregations. Historical sources document the enduring evangelical concern for “mass evangelism”—reaching as many people, by whatever means possible, with the gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ in order to bring about the redemption of American culture, which many evangelicals felt was slipping into chaos. A commitment to mass evangelism, facilitated by a typically more congregational- (as opposed to denominational-) centered polity, led evangelicals to gravitate towards building large meeting spaces, which allowed a large number of people to gather to hear a message in a relatively anonymous setting. They stressed the importance of using of contemporary forms of music and communication to maintain relevance, and they targeted programs and services to expressed needs. Not all evangelicals embraced mass-evangelism, nor did they uniformly endorse the creation of large, contemporary, needs-oriented churches, but mass-evangelism, building large, visible churches, and using a variety of “attractions” to bring people to the congregation formed a dominant refrain in American Protestantism from at least the mid-nineteenth century onwards, more than 100 years before Saddleback and its contemporaries appeared on the scene.

The influential Christian social commentator Josiah Strong gives voice to a vision of the church whose marching orders are to “save souls” and to reverse the moral decay of America through the healthy spiritual and physical growth of adults, children and families.³⁸ In 1893, Strong wrote what could easily have come from a modern church marketing manual,

The question then becomes this: Will the church enlarge her conceptions and activities to the wide measure of her mission and apply the principles of the Gospel to the entire life of each community? Here is the opportunity of the ages for her to gain a commanding influence over the lives of the multitude and fashion the unfolding civilization of the future.³⁹

Strong, like many others of his day, realized that the center of gravity of American culture was rapidly shifting to large cities. However, the city conjured many negative images in the imagination of many 19th Century evangelicals,⁴⁰ even the prominent Chicago urban revivalist Dwight L. Moody expressed these sentiments when he said, “the gulf between the church and the masses is growing deeper, wider, and darker every hour.”⁴¹ But Strong criticized evangelicals for their fear of the city. He viewed the rise of urban para-church ministries like the YMCA/YWCA as indicative of the local church’s failure to develop an effective strategy to reach the masses.⁴² Billy Sunday, a prominent American Presbyterian revivalist, controversial and theatrical in style, argued along similar lines,

Every preacher is striving to get the multitude to come to church. If not mass evangelism, then why church mass meetings? In sport we appeal to the masses, in baseball, football, prize-fights, theaters . . . The Church will never reach the spiritual position held fifteen years ago until it returns to mass evangelism.⁴³

Accompanying Sunday’s comments in the *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, another author remarks, “Where the revival, or ‘mass evangelism,’ is discounted by pastor or church . . . this results in a cold church formalism which will preclude any kind of evangelism or spiritual religion.”⁴⁴ These quotations echo the chorus of revivalism, sung throughout 19th and early-20th century American evangelical religion. Here

the refrain of revivalism urged evangelicals to see the city as an opportunity for outreach and expansion. The church represented the key institution in this clarion call to reach the cities for Christ.

Dwight L. Moody spent several years in London where he attended the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Spurgeon's church left a deep impression on Moody and exerted an important influence on fundamentalist ecclesiology. In a 1934 article in *the Moody Bible Institute Monthly* commemorating the centenary of Spurgeon's birth, Rev. W.H. Hockmann extols the ministry of the Metropolitan Tabernacle,

The Tabernacle has been a bee-hive of activity. Overflowing in all directions, not less than thirty centers of Christian ministry were established in different parts of the London area, with some eight thousand children enrolled in various Sunday Schools. A colportage association was formed [for the distribution of tracts and religious materials], alms houses sustained, orphanages for both boys and girls established and the world renowned Pastors College brought into being. Never did the crowds of eager listeners cease to gather at the Tabernacle doors long before the hours for Sunday services.

Yet in the midst of this popularity,

No man was keener to detect its [modernism's] subtle sophistries, or sense its deadly perils. While his particular forte was evangelism . . . nevertheless he waged a valiant and uncompromising warfare [with modernism]. . . . The Metropolitan pulpit never ceased to thunder against compromise with evil, or unbelief or modern thought.⁴⁵

This article leaves little doubt that the eighteenth century emphasis on reaching the masses remained alive and well in the early part of the twentieth century. Seventy-five years later, Spurgeon's "megachurch" continued to occupy an important place in the evangelical Protestant imaginary.

Temple Baptist Church, in the quintessential American boomtown, Detroit, MI, exemplifies the strong connections between revivalism and the construction of large, elaborate churches. By 1937, the church had moved into a 5,000-seat sanctuary, which was filled to capacity by their pastor, the famous Texas revivalist J. Frank Norris. With 5,000 people in attendance at Sunday school in 1955, many considered it the largest church in America.⁴⁶ After relocating to the Detroit suburbs in 1968, they built a 4,500 seat-sanctuary. Of this structure one admirer remarked, "The four million dollar building is a testimony to the desire on the part of the people to honor God with the very best . . . The carpeted aisles and blue velvet seats give an atmosphere of luxury." But as their long-time pastor, Dr. G. B. Vick pointed out (he shared the pulpit with Norris, who split his time between Temple Baptist and First Baptist in Dallas, TX), the luxurious surroundings do not indicate a movement away from their simple, revivalist roots, "If this church gets too fancy, I'll sprinkle sawdust down the aisle and remind the folks that this is an evangelistic tabernacle."⁴⁷ Vick's remarks remind us that the megachurches of the early 1970s continued to invoke the legacy of revivalism and mass evangelism as central components of their identity.

A move to reach the urban masses raised the issue of the degree to which cultural accommodation should occur within churches. Leaders tempered the focus

on mass evangelism by concerns about apostasy—churches must not attempt popularity without proper theological integrity. A letter in response to Billy Sunday's call to mass-evangelism article complained, "The argument about mass-appeal of sports, theatres, and politics, is much out of place when applied to religion. Those things have to do with the carnal and physic, not the spiritual."⁴⁸ Some worried that mass evangelism and using popular methods to appeal to the masses would cause the church to lose core beliefs, a trap into which so-called liberal or modernist churches had fallen. In spite of these concerns, evangelicals remained convinced that firm conviction could overcome any of the inherent problems with appealing to the masses. The editor of *Moody Monthly* remarked, "There is still something to be said for mass evangelism, although like many other things it suffers from 'misuse.' The appeal to the 'carnal and physic' is the common appeal of the gospel, and therein it demonstrates its power . . ."⁴⁹ In an article about church publicity, the managing editor of a Christian magazine writes,

The church needs promotion. We need to forward our work by means of publicity. It is vitally necessary for us to adapt modern methods to our advertising program. Adapting modern methods of promotion does not mean that we must be modernistic in doctrine. We can apply sane, up-to-the-minute promotional principles and suggestions, and keep our message sound and evangelical. The primary purpose of the church is to proclaim the message of God's grace and win people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. *In order to do this it is necessary to utilize every means at our disposal.*⁵⁰

Fears about cultural accommodation leading to theological apostasy long-held many evangelicals away from ministry to the urban masses. But, a pragmatic appeal to doing whatever it takes to win souls, coupled with separating cultural relevance from theological integrity, remained an important counter argument throughout the 20th Century. In 1969, Dr. Dallas Billington, pastor of the Akron Baptist Temple, with an average Sunday school attendance of 5,762, demonstrated the continuing appeal of this logic, "Our aim is to win a soul, not false advertising. We will do anything possible to get people to attend, and present the gospel."⁵¹

Conclusion

The end of the Second World War brought with it the prospect of millions of soldiers returning to America to settle into families, homes, and churches. Suburbs experienced explosive growth, the government poured money into building thousands of miles of highways linking residential communities to factories and other employment centers, the cost of owning and operating a car dropped considerably, and large retail shopping centers began to dot the suburban landscape. By 1955, *Life* magazine reported that \$750 million worth of church building construction had begun that year (\$6.6 billion in 2014 dollars); Denver, CO alone saw the birth of 45 new congregations.⁵² A writer in *Moody Monthly*, born by patriotism and post-war optimism gave evangelicals their marching orders:

The . . . guarantee that our flag may not lose its meaning is to win America for Christ and the Church . . . Christians must begin to invite the young and old to church . . . Every Christian must get out and touch American life with

Christ's saving power if the millions of unchurched children, young people, and adults of our nation are to be won.⁵³

A buoyant economy and an exploding urban population meant new churches, some of them very large, began to pop up everywhere. Elmer Towns, who from 1969 to 1974, produced a list of the ten largest Sunday schools in America, documented very large Baptist churches in Hollywood, FL, Riverdale, MD, Akron, OH, Hammond, IN, Denver, CO, and Van Nuys, CA.⁵⁴ It was easy to mistake the sudden appearance of large congregations across the United States as the birth of a new kind of institution. However, the bulk of the evidence demonstrates that the megachurch enjoys a long historical precedent among Protestants. The 18th, 19th and early 20th Centuries gave birth to a number of large, multi-purpose churches, often built around a popular preacher. These congregations employed the latest technology to reach as many people using all available means. The cultural fuel for the creation of these kinds of churches came primarily from a desire to reach the "unchurched" with the salvation message, to keep society from falling away from its Christian foundations, and, ultimately, to redeem the culture for Christ. The rapid urban and suburban expansion of the United States, which had continued apace since the early 18th Century and exploded after WWII, provided the fuel for these expansionist dreams.

The 1970s and 1980s brought the right mix of factors to put very large, Protestant congregations on the broader cultural stage. At the beginning of the 1980s, the media, pastors, city planners and ordinary citizens cemented the image of the megachurch as a new made-in-the-USA religious institution. But those who see the megachurch as a "modern invention," without a long history are wrong. Protestants had long built large, multi-purpose buildings that housed a host of religious and worldly services under one roof. Few have stopped to recognize the strong historical precedent for what we now term the megachurch. As a Protestant impulse, the megachurch goes back to the beginnings of the Reformation in Europe.

The media does not bear singular responsibility for the historical amnesia about the megachurch. Many insiders share equal complicity. By the 1970s, a group of large-church pastors including James Kennedy, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren already had a well-developed sense that their form of congregational organization lacked precedence. And while megachurch promoters went out of their way to dispel media stereotypes of these churches, they did not argue with the idea that their institutions lacked historical continuity. The pastor of a large church in Los Alamitos, CA told a reporter,

The contemporary perspective is that church isn't for the weak, infirm, unintelligent. It's relevant to the young, active mover-shaker . . . That means more of a 'one-stop, supermarket approach' to spirituality . . . People expect spick-and-span nurseries, drug and alcohol counseling, even Monday Night Football events.⁵⁵

During the 1980s and 90s, middle class America experienced important social-structural shifts that privileged large churches. In particular, the increase in female labor force participation put a time squeeze on the discretionary time enjoyed by families, and made large, well-staffed congregations appealing.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, while changing family dynamics and favorable development

processes aided the popularity of megachurches in America, we make a mistake if we confuse their increase in prevalence with them constituting “a new social form.” They are not a new religious phenomenon, let alone one of “the most important developments of modern Christian history.” They represent an enduring model of ecclesial organization in Protestantism, stretching back to the early 17th Century. Hopefully, situating megachurches in their proper historical context will avoid starry-eyed optimism at the wonder of these spectacular congregations, and curmudgeonly critiques of them as flash-in-the-pan organizations with little staying power.

Endnotes

The author extends deepest thanks to Mark Chaves, who provided the original impetus behind this research. Thanks are also due to Grant Wacker for his help and support to a sociologist posing as an historian, to Soon-Cha Rha for his helpful comments, and to Glenda LaCoste of Document Delivery Services for assistance tracking down primary source documents. Address correspondence to David Eagle, Department of Sociology, Duke University, PO Box 90088, Durham, NC 27708-0088. Email: david.eagle@duke.edu.

1. Russell Chandler, “Test-Marketing the Gospel—a Consumer Survey Helped Design Willow Creek Church for Its ‘Customers,’” *San Francisco Chronicle* December 24, 1989.

2. Ibid.

3. Lyle E. Schaller, “Megachurch!,” *Christianity Today* 34 (1990).

4. Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, book *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco, 2007).

5. Patrick Allitt, book *Religion in America since 1945: A History* (New York, 2003).

6. Martin Marty, “Minichurch and Megachurch,” *The Christian Century* 107 (1990).

7. Gustav Niebuhr, “Changing Landscape of Protestant Faith,” *New York Times* April 29, 1995.

8. Carol Flake, book *Redemptorama: Culture, Politics, and the New Evangelicalism* (New York, 1984).

9. Wilmer MacNair, *Unraveling the Mega-Church: True Faith or False Promises?* (Westport, CT, 2009).

10. My thesis is not without precedent. Mark Chaves makes this point in “All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context,” *Review of Religious Research* 47 (2006). Jeanne Kilde also shares this view and raises the intriguing question, “Is Christianity, at some level, always about performance and spectacle?” See *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 2002). John Vaughan, writing from an insider’s perspective, is careful to connect the large churches of late-twentieth century America to their historical predecessors in the US and America. See *The Large Church: A Twentieth-Century Expression of the First-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1985). Elmer L. Towns in, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1969), makes similar observations.

11. This point is developed in detail by Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying & Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ, 1995).

12. Judith Mitchell Buddenbaum, *Reporting News About Religion: An Introduction for Journalists*, 1st ed. (Ames, IA, 1998).

13. E. Barbara Phillips, "Novelty without Change," *Journal of Communication* 26 (1976).
14. Scott Thumma, "Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context," (Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 1996).
15. Chaves, "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context."
16. Ibid.
17. Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches*.
18. Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI, 1989).
19. Andrew Spicer, *Calvinist Churches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester and New York, 2007).
20. Jacques Perret, *Des Fortifications Et Artifices: Architecture Et Perspective* (Paris, 1601).
21. Roughly translated, "Fortifications and ideals, architecture and perspective."
22. Hélène Guicharnaud, "Approche De L'architecture Des Temples Protestants Construits En France Avant La Révocation," *Études théologiques et religieuses* 75 (2000); David Thomson, "Protestant Temples in France C. 1566–1623," in *L'Église dans l'Architecture de la Renaissance, Actes du colloque tenu à Tours 28–31 mai 1990*, ed. Jean Guillaume (Paris: Picard, 1995); Norman Westphal, "La Place Du Temple Dans Un Modèle De Ville Protestante: Les Propositions De Jaques Perret Dans Son Traité 'Des Fortifications Et Artifices (1601)'," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme en France* 152 (2006).
23. Per Gustaf Hamberg, book *Temples for Protestants: Studies in the Architectural Milieu of the Early Reformed Church and of the Lutheran Church* (Gothenburg, Sweden, 2002).
24. Author's translation.
25. Thomson, "Protestant Temples in France C. 1566–1623."
26. Jacques Pannier, *Un Architecte Français Au Commencement Du 17e Siècle* (Paris, 1911).
27. Harry S Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1991).
28. Spicer, *Calvinist Churches in Early Modern Europe*.
29. Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia, MO, 2003), 38.
30. Leon Nelson Nichols and Allan Knight Chalmers, *History of the Broadway Tabernacle* (New Haven, 1940).
31. Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History*, 38.
32. Agnes Rush Burr, *Russell H. Conwell: Founder of the Institutional Church in America: The Work and the Man* (Philadelphia, 1905).
33. Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History*.
34. Elbert M. Conover, book *Building the House of God* (New York, 1928).
35. Ibid.
36. Of core importance to churches was the religious education and socialization of children. For example, "The Church does not wish to or need to compete with either the

theater or the public schools, but the Church has successfully used and adapted other techniques learned from secular education,” from the book *The Church Builder* (New York, 1948). At the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, a model of the winning Sunday school design from an international competition was constructed. Another shows floorplans of several church Sunday schools, which could accommodate several hundred children in large-group and graded space, see Marion Lawrance, *Housing the Sunday School* (Boston, 1911). Many churches had separate spaces for youth groups and youth churches, demonstrating that ministry targeted at young people as a distinct demographic predates the youth ministries of the post-WWII era.

37. Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

38. Strong’s popularity was eclipsed only by Harriet Beecher Stowe, see J. Michael Utzinger, book *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and the Development of Evangelical Ecclesiology, 1887–1937* (Macon, GA, 2006).

39. Josiah Strong, *The New Era* (New York, 1893).

40. Utzinger, *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and the Development of Evangelical Ecclesiology, 1887–1937*.

41. Strong, *The New Era*.

42. Ibid.

43. Billy Sunday, “Evangelist Sunday on Mass Evangelism,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* 33 (1933).

44. Clarence Benson, “Our Monthly Potpourri: Increasing Leisure,” *ibid.* 34.

45. W.H. Hockmann, “Spurgeon, a Prince among Men,” *ibid.* (1934).

46. Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow*.

47. *Ibid.*, 84–85.

48. Mersene Elon Sloan, “The Bible and ‘Mass Evangelism,’” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* 23 (1934).

49. *Ibid.*

50. Theodore Engstrom, “Publicizing Your Church,” *ibid.* 45 (1945).

51. Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow*.

52. Staff Writers, “An Unprecedented Wave of Religious Observance Sweeps over the U.S.,” *Life*, December 26 (1955).

53. Oscar C. Hanson, “Are They Dying in Vain?,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* 45 (1945).

54. Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow; America’s Fastest Growing Churches; Why 10 Sunday Schools Are Growing Fast* (1972); *Great Soul-Winning Churches* (1973); *World’s Largest Sunday School* (1974).

55. Karen Gallegos, “Churches Get Unwanted Feeling in Cities,” *Press-Telegram* (Long Beach, CA) December 30 (1990).

56. Chaves, “All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context.”