
*The Subversive Evangelical* is a sociological study of The Meeting House (TMH) founded by Bruxy Cavey in 1996, and is based on Schuurman’s two-year immersion in various aspects of the subculture of TMH. (The author’s methodology is described in an appendix.) The Meeting House had its origins in a Brethren in Christ church in Ontario and is openly Anabaptist in its teaching. Currently TMH has 19 regional sites meeting typically in theaters, with a total of about 5,500 people attending each Sunday. About 45 percent of attendees also belong to one of 200 “Home Churches” that meet during the week. The church is founded on the paradox of aspiring “to be a church for people who are not ‘into’ church” (11).

This book is not only a study of one church; it treats TMH as representative of some 1,800 megachurches active in North America today (7). It also seeks to offer “a new understanding of megachurches as more than personality cults or religious Walmarts” (17). A megachurch like TMH can provide a different kind of space, one “that offers opportunity for personal transformation . . . towards the image of the subversive, peace-loving Jesus that Cavey preaches” (228).

Cavey is a champion of irony. Schuurman accordingly devotes Chapter Four to showing how irony is part of the liturgy of TMH, and also offers this comment in the Epilogue: “At the heart of TMH is Cavey’s body, an icon of the retro-hippie culture, and branded with his ironic tattoo. He is the unclerical pastor leading a movie theatre-based church in a subversive mission to eradicate ‘religion’” (224). Why the emphasis on subversion and irony? Cavey is trying to create a space for the many evangelicals who are increasingly embarrassed about the “evangelical” label. Often associated with being legalistic, judgmental, and politically motivated, many are now labeling themselves as “new” or “emerging” evangelicals. Schuurman prefers to call them “reflexive evangelicals” because they, like Cavey, are trying to escape a “spoiled identity” by adopting a deconstructionist mindset, questioning and problematizing everything conventional (xiv, 75).

Schuurman also explores the nature of charisma in trying to
understand Cavey and megachurches. In Chapter Two he identifies three different meanings of charisma: (1) the biblical notion of gifts of the Spirit; (2) Max Weber’s notion of it as a certain quality of an individual personality that makes followers look up to him as superhuman; (3) the artificially engineered charisma of the celebrity figure. All three meanings apply to Cavey. The most common answer TMH attendees give for joining is “the appeal of Cavey’s teaching” (139). He also has a core following who look up to him as an authority. Cavey is also a celebrity figure. Chapter Six describes how his public persona is carefully managed by a seven-person marketing and communications department whose job is to promote the identity and programs of TMH, with Cavey as its icon and key spokesman. Somewhat ironically, a “Welcome” DVD extensively used at TMH says, “We don’t take ourselves seriously; we just take Jesus seriously” (163).

I was particularly intrigued with Schuurman’s analysis of “The Playful Production of Ironic Evangelicalism” (Chapter Seven). Faith and fun coexist at TMH, complete with love feasts and dance parties at which Cavey is the DJ (169-81). The author deconstructs the “seriousness fallacy” all too common in scholarly treatments of religion (162). Scholars mistakenly assume that religion must be sombre and strict, and that any expression of religious enjoyment involves capitulation to consumer entertainment and marketing culture. Surely religion should also “refresh people for the ordinary work of their lives” (240).

“How has TMH changed you?” This was a standard question Schuurman asked his TMH interviewees (228). Responses varied. When asked whether they were coming to identify as Anabaptist or pacifist, “the most common answer was in the negative,” although a member of the executive leadership team hoped they would somehow “unconsciously carry” the Anabaptist values they were being taught (229). A frequent response was that TMH had taught them to “completely debunk religion,” which suggests that Cavey’s negative message is getting through (229).

In Chapter Eight Schuurman examines the fragility of a church largely centred on a charismatic authority. He shows that TMH has been able to manage Cavey’s evident weaknesses. There are certainly some people who leave TMH because they become disillusioned with the leader and the church (115-21). Indeed, the turnover rate is “high” (237). And there are
outside critics of Cavey and TMH (209-12). But the church continues to thrive and, according to Schuurman, will most likely continue long after Cavey has retired (222).

The author devotes the book’s final chapter to personal reflections on reflexive evangelicals, offering two astute observations. “To the degree that reflexive evangelicals (like Cavey) deny their religious and institutional character, they lean to a negative identity,” he says, “a countercultural stereotype and short-sighted neglect for structures that can be a scaffold for human flourishing” (236). Schuurman also argues that irony and ridicule when overused become agents of despair, ending up by becoming incoherent, tiresome, cynical, and even nihilistic (226).

*The Subversive Evangelical* grew out of a Ph.D. dissertation and unfortunately still retains much of a dissertation feel. However, it is the first major study of Cavey and TMH (247), and its analysis deserves to be widely read for an understanding of religious trends in North America today.

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