

CELEBRATION CHURCHES – AWAKEN CONFERENCES – GROWING YOUNG MOVEMENT IN SOUTHERN UNION

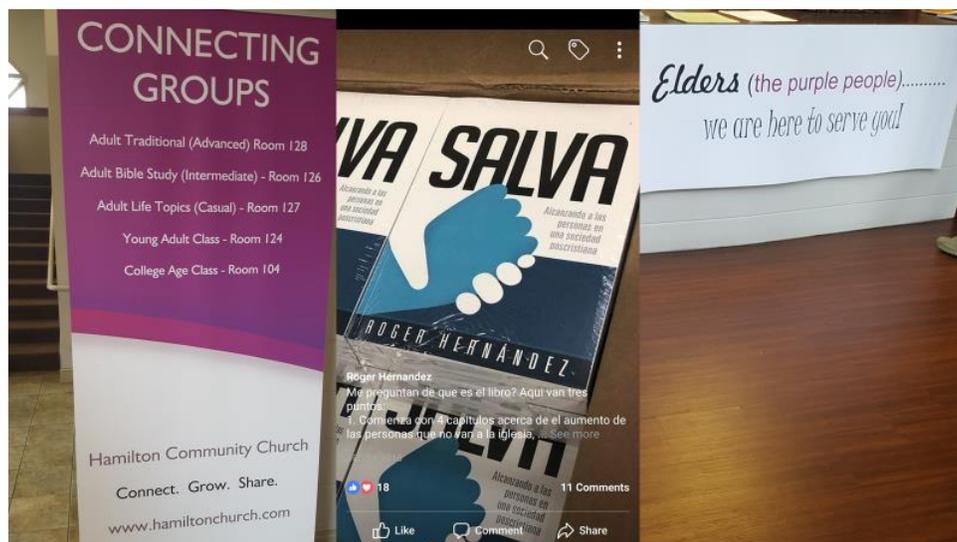
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Several Saturdays ago we engaged in some Adventist tourism. We had received a small packet from a father in Buenos Aires who requested that we give it to his daughter who lives in the area where we live. When the daughter didn't come to take it, we decided to go to the church where she attends, to deliver it personally. We knew that the worship style of Hamilton Community Church was celebracionist, and that for several years it has been characterized by a strident style of rock music and with a stage layout similar to that of rock concerts.

Before sharing our observations, I need to say that there are many conservative churches in the area around Collegedale and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Therefore, what I will report here is not representative of the style of worship of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in that area. My concern is rooted in the desire of some to implement this style as the standard of worship in the Southern Union for both the English and Spanish communities.

Although I had apparently overlooked it, I was later told that there is an ashtray at the entrance of the church. We arrived around 10 AM, the scheduled time for the Sabbath School program to begin. They served a breakfast with tea (I didn't ask if it was strong or not). Some went into the worship services carrying plates of food. We asked for the Sabbath School, and were led to a small room, where 13 persons attended. You can see in the attached file, the picture that I took of the sign. This was the only class which studied the Sabbath School Quarterly, and it is referred to on the sign as Adult Traditional (Advanced) Room 128. When the class learned that this was the first time we had attended that church, a lady warned us, smiling, that the music in that church was very loud. Also smiling we replied that we were aware of that.

Another sign at the entrance also caught my attention. "Elders (the purple people)..... we are here to serve you!" I couldn't help but recall the Roman Catholic Church which has a spiritual army dressed in purple. Is it the color chosen for distinguished persons? Does that color have something to do with rock music settings?



Once within in the worship service, we noticed that there were no windows, the ceiling was black, and the lights were off to focus the eyes in the stage which was lit up with psychedelic lights that alternate between purple, violet, and red.



Those who played guitar, and especially the young lady who sang, gyrated to the rhythm of the music. At a certain moment, the speakers turned down the volume of the music, which produced a kind of solace after such a loud racket, and one of the young leaders began to express his feelings about Jesus, in a sentimentalist style like that which can be often seen among Pentecostals. See also the following page:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lCm-76lscqI&feature=youtu.be>

I didn't stand up when the congregation sang the principal song before the sermon. I saw that a certain number of other people didn't stand up either. A small child in front of us placed a little finger in each ear to counteract the deafening electronic drums. In name only could this service be distinguished from a loud rock concert. The style of dress of several attendees revealed a variety of social lifestyles. The pastor preached a good sermon on grace, fortunately without screaming. The only thing that distinguished him from pastors of other churches of the area was his dress. Rather than a suit he wore common slacks and a shirt without a tie.

The role of Southern Union

This style of worship is promoted by Roger Hernandez, the Southern Union evangelist based in Atlanta, Georgia. His dreams of a megachurch inspired the dreams of other pastors who were planning to gather all the churches of Chattanooga, Tennessee into such a church. Those pastors began introducing red-purple lights in the platform of their churches. One of them is planning to paint the ceiling of his church with black, in a clear attempt to imitate the Hamilton Community Church. When an evangelical singer comes to give a concert in Chattanooga, he is the first one to communicate that he is making plans to attend the concert.

The pastor of the Spanish congregation of Collegedale called his church “Su Casa Church,” a term that we also heard in the Hamilton church. His church is associated with Southern Adventist University and is relatively small. But he dreamed of raising three million dollars to build a great building. He secured the services of a fundraiser who increased the expectations to a megachurch of five and six million dollars, and some speculated perhaps even eight or nine million to build a kind of stadium to worship the Lord. But about one month ago, that fundraiser disappeared, and those dreams collapsed. The pastor moved to Florida, allowing that church to return to normality.

The attached file shows the book that Roger Hernandez is promoting, to justify his approach with the argument that an increasing number of members are no longer attending church. His proposal is to recover the youth of the church, offering them in church, what appeals to them in the world. In this way, the lack of spiritual power seen in many churches is replaced by what attracts people to the world, now available within the church. Every sensational show forms part of a “lite” gospel. Every worldly bait to lure the youth is found now not only outside, but within.

What Roger Hernandez will not tell you, is that while one or two of those who left are won, many of those who were faithful are horrified and leave, or are introduced to a worship style that brings them nearer to the world. That style of worship produces a separation like oil from the water. Many people won in this way are unstable. They participate in waves of sentimentalism, then depart, later on to return and to leave yet again, because the seed does not fall on a cultivated ground, but on the way (just in passing). I ask myself, are the words of Jesus to the Pharisees in Matt 23:15 not also applicable to that celebration proposition of those who want to “reform” the church and create a more Pentecostal environment?

In the meeting that we witnessed at the Hamilton Community Church there was a baptism. The people clapped their hands when the baptism was consummated. Roger Hernandez also encourages applause when he calls the audience to accept Christ. He applauds and request to applaud when everyone stand up to accept Jesus. The focus is on social matters and community acceptance, not on God and His Word. Roger claims to have learned over the years in his pastoral work, to advance the celebration style little by little because there are many traditionalists who oppose the change.

Southern Tidings - Awaken Conference – Growing Young Movement



The evangelistic style promoted by Roger Hernandez in the Southern Union is not to teach doctrines, but to give a testimony of Jesus. The style of worship he enjoys is the same that you find in the Hamilton

Community Church. Rock music, purple and violet lights with powerful sound systems are employed, supposedly to retain the membership of the church. In *Tidings*, April 2019 (the official magazine of Southern Union: see the attached file), rock music is cited as a principal means to empower the youth with what is presumed to be the Holy Ghost. The article considered briefly here is *Awaken Conference*.

Go to the internet, and you will see that this is a movement that is all the rage among celebration and charismatic evangelical churches. The emphasis is placed on the feelings that are expressed through the rock music and stages lit in purple which is so common at pop concerts. The most troubling aspect is those pastors who imitate that hybrid worship that is penetrating all the churches, even our own church. Look at the following webpage:

<https://crossings.church/event/awaken/>

What influence inspires the Southern Union to introduce rock music and stage layouts into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, supposedly to keep the members of the church? That article “Awaken Conferences” in *Tidings* leaves no room for doubt. They take “inspiration from the Growing Young movement.” And the magazine emphasizes this: “One of the biggest highlights from this event was the music and worship.” That kind of evangelism and worship is promoted by the Southern Union, an evangelical movement typical of the emerging church, which is captivating the youth in the Christian world. Search Google under *Growing Young Movement*, and you will find the same scenario as that of the Hamilton Community Church, and the setting chosen by the Southern Union *Awaken Young Conference*.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/we-day-celebrates-growing-youth-movement/2928223.html>

As you can see, these leaders of our church are even copying the titles employed by those charismatic churches. They substitute the lack of spiritual power with rock music and “candombe” rhythm, with the intent of representing the power of the Holy Spirit coming down upon the congregation. Instead of worshipping God, they worship feelings. Instead of attending the church to seek God, many go to feel pleasure. No wonder that about two years ago Roger Hernandez invited a well known Pentecostal preacher who promotes such music to inspire the Seventh-day Adventist pastors of that Union. See:

<http://www.adventistdistinctivemessages.com/English/Documents/Dantegebelamanecer.pdf>

Ryan Hodgins, the author of *Awaken Young Conference* in *Tidings*, believes that through pop music “the Spirit of the living God can come alive in us.” He quotes Craig Groeschel, a Methodist pastor who obtained a masters degree in *The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, and founded the *Life.Church* on his “non-traditional style”, introducing marketing methods to attract people. His “*Life Covenant* grew rapidly, eventually evolving to become (as of January 2019) the largest Protestant church in the United States with 32 *Life.Church* campuses. Groeschel says (quoted by Hodgins): “To reach people we aren’t reaching, we have to do things that we aren’t doing.” Our question is do those things that Groeschel promotes and Hodgins endorses doing in the Seventh-day Adventist Church correspond to what God wants us to do? Will those who are trained in that kind of worship really be able to tell the difference between such worship and secular rock concerts, between what is sacred and what profane?

God raised the Seventh-day Adventist Church to give the three angel’s messages. The first one says: “Fear God, and give him glory... Worship” the Creator. This implies a call not to worship anything else. It is equivalent to say, don’t worship music, don’t worship feelings, don’t worship pleasure, nothing that could interpose between you and your Creator. More than pleasing the perverted tastes of the world, God wants us to please Him, and educate people for pleasing Him, looking for Him not in our emotions, but in His Word.

Warnings of Jesus through the Spirit of Prophecy

I will conclude here and leave you with a few statements from the Spirit of Prophecy, which anticipated these spurious attempts at reviving the church. Let me tell you that I believe in the Spirit of Prophecy.

“Among many of the ministers of Christ there is a feeling of unrest, a desire to imitate the romantic style of modern revivalists, a desire to do something great, to create a sensation, to be accounted able speakers, and to gain for themselves honor and distinction. If such could encounter perils and receive the honor given to heroes, they would engage in the work with unflagging energy. But to live and labor almost unknown, to toil and sacrifice for Jesus in obscurity, receiving no special praise from men—this requires a soundness of principle and a steadfastness of purpose that but few possess. Were there a greater effort to walk humbly with God, looking away from men and laboring only for Christ’s sake, far more would be accomplished” (5 T 132-3).

“Your danger, my dear brother, is in making the grave mistake of supposing that success depends on drawing a large congregation by outward display. To bring anything of a theatrical nature into the preaching of the word of God is to use common fire instead of the sacred fire of God’s kindling” (*Letter 51*, 1902, pp. 5, 6). “The appetite of the people for a theatrical style of preaching may be satisfied, but the effects made have not saving results. Outward display, expensive arrangements, do not give the people the education in gospel missionary work that the Lord desires them to receive. These things work against the truth, hindering instead of advancing it; for the truth is mingled with common, worldly methods. God’s money is not to be expended in this way” (9 MR 387).

“The truth for this time needs nothing of this kind in its work of converting souls. A bedlam of noise shocks the senses and perverts that which if conducted aright might be a blessing. The powers of satanic agencies blend with the din and noise, to have a carnival, and this is termed the Holy Spirit’s working...” (VSS 418). “Genuine faith and love, and the reverence and fear of God, will have a refining influence on the life. Spurious pretenses, emotional, fitful, religious experiences will also make themselves apparent in the life. Too often, for a time, these pass for genuine religion; but their influence is such that the question is forced upon those who have a knowledge of the fruits of righteousness, What is the chaff to the wheat?” (Jer 23:28) (*GH*, August 1, 1906, 2)

“Popular revivals are too often carried by appeals to the imagination, by exciting the emotions, by gratifying the love for what is new and startling. Converts thus gained have little desire to listen to Bible truth, little interest in the testimony of prophets and apostles. Unless a religious service has something of a sensational character, it has no attractions for them. A message which appeals to unimpassioned reason awakens no response. The plain warnings of God’s word, relating directly to their eternal interests, are unheeded” (*GC* 463).

“The inquiry in many hearts is, How shall I find happiness? We are not to make it our object to live for happiness, but we shall surely find it in the path of humble obedience” (*ST* May 22, 1884, 7). “Let no one make his feelings his idol, and bow his soul down to worship and serve his sensations. ‘Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve’” (*ST* April 9, 1994, 2). “If the preaching is of an emotional character, it will affect the feelings, but not the heart and conscience. Such preaching results in no lasting good, but it often wins the hearts of the people and calls out their affections for the man who pleases them. They forget that God has said: ‘Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils’” (5 T 301).