

From the June 4, 2010 Issue

Escape From The Barney Hive Mind

Trinitarian theology has affirmed my dislike of Barney the Dinosaur. Not Barney himself, but the TV show that features him. The kids on that show have always creeped me out. They are pre-pubescent versions of *The Stepford Wives* -- inexplicably, enthusiastically, and relentlessly *agreeable*. Here's a typical scene:

[Kids are playing hopscotch]

KID #1: Hey, let's play dress-up!

ALL THE OTHER KIDS: Okay!

[Kids play dress-up]

KID #2: Hey, let's play on the swings!

ALL THE OTHER KIDS: Okay!

[Kids play on the swings]

KID #3: Hey, let's run around in circles!

ALL THE OTHER KIDS: Okay!

[Kids run around in circles]

etc...

Human children do not act like this. Of course, it *is* a TV show about a purple stuffed animal that comes to life and starts acting like a Kindergarten teacher. Granted. But it's not the lack of realism that bothers me. It's the implied message that this is how kids SHOULD act. That good kids should immediately and automatically agree with every idea that's raised in their presence. Don't get me wrong; it certainly is good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity. But these kids are not a community; they're a HIVE. Creepy.

When the Triune life finds unhindered expression in human flesh, do we act like the children of the Barney Hive Mind? Is that the kind of unity that has earthed itself in human life? Or in other words, does the gospel anticipate a glorious future in which we never disagree with each other again?

From my Trinity-inspired gut, I have to say "No." In the Triune relations, community and personhood are present in equal infinite amounts. Distinction without separation. Unity *and* diversity. Boundaries *and* Intimacy. And when I try to imagine this Life enfleshing itself in humanity without destroying humanity, I don't see disagreement going away. I don't see the Barney children.

Disagreement is a good and beautiful part of being human. Each one of us has our own understanding of things. We see things from diverse angles, and this is not evil. It is good and pleasant for people to share their diverse viewpoints with each other, and in this way continually to learn from each other.

Peter Senge - lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management and bestselling author of *The Fifth Discipline* - describes what he calls "learning organizations." These can be corporations, non-profits,

churches, clubs, or any other kind of human community. They are “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.”

Senge details five “disciplines” that are uniquely present in every learning organization:

PERSONAL MASTERY: Continually clarifying and deepening your personal vision, and being honest with yourself and others about current reality.

MENTAL MODELS: Being aware and transparent about your own deeply ingrained assumptions that influence your understanding and actions.

SHARED VISION: Finding a shared future in the overlapping of diverse personal visions, inspiring commitment rather than compliance.

TEAM LEARNING: Dialoguing, willingly suspending your own assumptions in order to try on those of others; entering into genuine thinking-together.

SYSTEMS THINKING: Integrating the other four disciplines through a dual focus on both the parts and the whole.

In a learning organization, diversity is a strength. It is a weakness only when people fail to be honest with themselves and others. In other words, it is truth that sets them free.

In the phenomenon of learning organizations, the world of business management is coming face-to-face with the beauty of the Triune God incarnate in human communities. And like the Triune community, they are both beautiful AND productive.

Unlike Barney and those creepy kids.

~ John Stonecypher