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Postmodern Worship
Transcendence and Truth in the Days of YouTube and iPod

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Virtually every scholar who addresses the topic of postmodernism begins with a complicated and lengthy survey describing its origins and multiple nuances and influences upon various disciplines. Most conclude that defining postmodernism is self-defeating. We can be grateful that its history and personalities have a readily accessible and growing bibliography. We begin with the assumption that, no matter how difficult and enigmatic the definitions, one simple fact remains: its ideologies have affected the ways in which the contemporary worship event is experienced. Our discussion will be limited to two essential features of postmodernism relevant to the contemporary worship experience as we see it – Transcendence and Truth. Transcendence can be defined as reality beyond the material world of nature as experienced by our senses – the metaphysical. Truth, for purposes of this paper, will not be used epistemologically as shown by propositional claims discovered through deductive logic or scientific empiricism, but rather ontologically – a discovery of the sense of ‘being’, beyond the observable.

One of our working assumptions is that church attendees, both believers and non-believers, are thirsting for the ontological unseen reality and power outside themselves, not necessarily the epistemological way of knowing. When we speak of ‘contemporary’ we do not mean a particular style of worship, but rather any and all worship events practiced today by most Evangelical and/or mainline Protestant churches. YouTube and iPod are prescient examples of technologies capable of enormous transformative power, changing the ways in which we

consume information, assimilate truth and contemplate transcendence. We hope to offer a responsible critique of the current debate surrounding postmodernism's affect on truth and transcendence through cultural mediums, then provide a working template for assessing current worship models.

Discussing the evolution of truth and transcendence in modern and postmodern philosophy is a daunting task, one that other scholars are committed to. We begin with a basic understanding of how modernism developed, peaked, and then, as many claim, declined. In fact Myron B. Penner claims that without an understanding of modernism's roots postmodernism remains a mystery. He offers three ways in which postmodernism is connected to modernism's history (18). Many scholars have written of modernism's decline.¹ They describe its demise in the late twentieth century and offer excellent introductions to the pre-emergence of the postmodern spirit. Some argue further that postmodernism has totally shredded and eclipsed the Enlightenment's grip on rationality and dualism. Of those, Carl Raschke suggests in his book *The Next Reformation*, "What postmodernism as a philosophical movement has accomplished to date is to show up the idolatrous and relativistic proclivities of modernism as a whole" (31). Raschke and others claim that hidden within the complexities and contradictions of postmodernism certain themes have emerged, justly and powerfully eroding modernism's hold on the secular and religious mindset – a particular worldview that had, up until Nietzsche's works, gone unquestioned since the early years of the scientific revolution. Others echo Raschke and plead with the contemporary church to take seriously the prejudicial assumptions of the Enlightenment project.²

¹ For two examples of authors who believe that modernity is in decline, see Middleton and Walsh; and Grenz.

² See Guinness; Clapp; Smith; McLaren; Sweet, and Fitch.

Modernist notions of truth and reality have indeed eroded, and whether one lays the blame at the feet of postmodern ideology is certainly open to debate, but the fact remains: postmodernism has gradually made its way from the halls of academia to the living rooms and hard drives of average Americans. Generation Xers, and now ‘NetGens’ (a term used by Sweet and others), define normative, rational, empirical truth “. . . according to individual, subjective categories . . .” (Dockery 13). If this is true, then how can today’s worship event communicate truth and lead congregants in worshipping God ‘in Spirit and truth’ as uttered by Christ in John’s gospel? How can worship leaders design services that appeal to the culturally disoriented, most of whom are not seeking the rationally framed, epistemological literacy of their forefathers and mothers? One possible answer may lay in the exploitation of symbols and images used (and abused) by our techno-saturated, media-savvy, anti-historical, yes, postmodern culture. Let’s explore the risks and possibilities of embracing this symbolic pathway to ontological truth and transcendence. The following remarks are eloquently elaborated Tex Sample’s *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World*, written in 1998. He followed this with *Powerful Persuasion – Multimedia Witness in Christian Worship*, both of which we highly recommend.

There is no shortage of critics, preceding Sample, who have warned about the negative consequences of our image-driven, consumer culture. Neil Postman penned such a warning in 1985 entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. His well-known polemic is occasionally hyperbolic, but much of what he prophesized has proven true. Witness the YouTube phenomenon, where the unknown can be infamous overnight and millions of video shorts are available at the click of the mouse and as you know, now available on the newly released iPhone. We have the world at our disposal – a world based on the visual rooted in the multi-sensory entertainment world, mediated by a constant barrage of decontextualized images. Postman outlined the epistemological path

from the printing press to television, noting the deadly and potent consequence of abandoning the rationally based word. Marva Dawn later cautions the church to be vigilant against what Postman labeled as the idols of contemporary culture in her *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (41). Sample rightly softens Postman's critique, but also alerts us to the fact that images can transform us in numerous ways, both positively and negatively (32). Few would argue that the microchip and the virtual worlds of image and audio have solved most, if any, of humanity's problems, yet many of us have been duped into believing that global, cultural salvation is one upgrade away. We find ourselves saturated and drugged into a stupor by the idols of the techno world, unable and unwilling to retreat from its incessant assault on our minds and emotions.

Cultural idols come in many guises (Dawn identifies several), and are difficult to appraise. But it would be wise to consider Postman's reminder that the Decalogue's second commandment warns of making 'graven images.' In our image-driven, image-thirsty culture, the ubiquity of YouTube and iPod, along with the next generation of technological gizmos, should be a cause of concern for current and future disciples. In addition to Postman and Dawn, one can find a variety of views that warn the Church to remain unstained by worldly thinking.³

Middleton and Walsh aptly summarize the conservative view: "Both our unlimited yearning for the consumption of the new experiences and images at the postmodern carnival and our paralyzed acquiescence before the multiplicity of sideshows rob us of our genuine human dignity" (134). Many have patterned their lament after Jean Baurillard, an early postmodern thinker, who defined *simulacra* and the *hyperreal* as new, dangerous components of twentieth

³ See Overstreet; Josephson; Staub; or any of James Twitchell's works on American advertising.

century culture. He warned that our use of images gradually distorted and then replaced reality. His critique is seminal to the understanding of media studies and worship trends.⁴

Kevin and I believe that critiquing the rapidly changing and hypnotic techno-culture is an urgent task, one that will prepare us for informed and responsible worship. Postmodern thinking might offer us help in this critique, charting an unworn path to discovering truth and transcendence in our worship without feeding our ravenous thirst for the latest moving image offered by a culture that shows little interest in worshipping a transcendent, eternal God.

Postmodernism's rejection of rationality and truth claims help us recover the mystery of the ancient church, while guarding against the idolization and eventual assimilation of the graven images worshiped by our culture. The search for a non-rational path to a mysterious and loving God may be appealing to those who've grown up on a steady diet of electronic images. The late Robert Webber offered his wisdom in helping us recover the past, and many churches are experimenting with liturgical practices of old, finding new ways of discovering the ontological sense of truth as the essence of the eternal attributes of God. Using symbol and metaphor for uncovering truth is a legitimate and, some would say, the only way of truly knowing, in the ontological sense. One author notes the differences between our world and the ancients –

As we look at people's strivings from the ancient Greek beginnings of Western culture to our own time, we observe a diminishing capacity of people to strive upward toward the spiritual. We have lost our striving toward abstract ideas or God. Thus we [then] move in the opposite direction from that of the medievals. Where they projected their thoughts up to God, and saw meanings and symbols everywhere, we project our

⁴ See his *Simulacra and Simulations*.

thoughts down to man-made material objects and see no transcendent meanings or symbols anywhere (Josephson 203).

Louis Dupré, professor Emeritus of Philosophy of Religion at Yale, advocates for the use and recovery of symbolism, as well, claiming its power lies in the inherent variety of meanings for each and every Christian (10). He argues that a legitimate symbol, whether it's hanging from the baptismal font or one's neck, can inspire and activate the imagination of the Believer and non-Believer alike, allowing them to transcend their mundane, earthly existence. Symbols, both sacred and profane, are endowed with metaphorical potency and have power to move the soul to a state of transcendence that would otherwise be impossible in a rational universe, thus raising our spiritual sensitivities to a world of ultimate, ontological, reality and truth. The power of symbol in mythological themes is self-evident.

So we ask: When one attends a worship event, is there an expectancy that an atmosphere of divine presence be enhanced by the use of images or, are the images we use contributing to a materially heightened sensualism which hypnotically distracts from the sacred? Are we planning events that ape our cultural ceremonies and spectacles – the athletic stadium, the concert hall, the political rally, and unaware of the consequences of such? When the latest tools (media metaphors) and trends of culture – images, both still and moving – are employed in the worship event, perhaps the risk of idolatry increases exponentially. Idolatry of cultural spectacle is not healthy. The worship leadership must be willing to question their assumptions; assumptions often based on what David Fitch calls 'The Production of Experience', remarking that “. . . we look to the level of the worshiper's emotional involvement as a sign that we have worshiped God well. So when we plan our worship, we end up pursuing the arousal of emotions and the “worship experience” as an end in itself, which inevitably turns narcissistic” (96). 'Arousal' is a

loaded term, but the emotional state of the congregants is often manipulated (aroused) to the level of ‘pep rally’ (Fitch, again). Subtle manipulation through word and image easily leads us to idolatry. There is intoxicating emotional bliss in the satiation of multimedia. Healthy manipulation through both word and image should direct one towards the infinite, transcendent, yet personal God, using all multimedia in a responsible way. In either case, worship leaders should be aware that manipulation is a fact of worship and requires great discernment and prayer.

Postmodern thinking requires that we question our assumptions about truth-telling and we would do well to heed its call, avoiding the antagonistic sound bite rhetoric from those who wish to ignore the reality of our media-saturated culture. Let’s recognize that we can be prodded to a greater sense of God’s mystery without abandoning postmodernism *in toto*. We can mine postmodernism’s strengths, using them as an antidote to the habitual lust for images and choice afforded by our ‘culture of narcissism’. Our *iGadgets* and electronic media, as well as all screen-based images are double-edged swords. “The modern world, from the Reformation onward, made us text-trained, with the book our chief icon. The postmodern world demands that we be light-trained, with the screen the chief icon” (Sweet 32). Culture, all of culture, *is* technology, and technology must be reckoned with if we are to expose the lost to the Gospel without being swept away by the floods of idolatry, drowning in a world of what some have labeled ‘edutainment’. Let’s embrace reform, but embrace it with a discerning mind.

We have entered the Postmodern Reformation. Images are ubiquitous – inescapable metaphors of the culture of light and speed – and are increasingly replacing word-driven worship services. Truth and transcendence remain worthy components of worship for all ages and generations. The most serious question church leaders can ask is ‘Will we build up immunity, offer resistance, educate the congregants, or simply transform and assimilate images and

technology to satisfy our need to be postmodern?’ Kevin will now explore one possible answer to this question.

The following is a fictional model of a church’s transition from word-driven worship, rooted in the Enlightenment, to multi-sensory worship, aligned with the ever-evolving postmodern culture.

First Church, like most evangelical Protestant churches, offers worship that is centered on words – both sung and spoken. The success of any given service hinges on the quality of music and preaching. This word-driven worship places quite a bit of weekly stress on the worship leaders to produce meaningful worship. It also limits the manner in which the gospel can be proclaimed and embodied. The practice of word-driven worship ignores our variety of senses by which we can receive and process information and meaning. Word-driven worship also ignores our living in a culture filled with colors, textures, and images, all conveying multiple layers of communication.

Along with word-driven worship, First Church exhibits other qualities in worship that are representative of the free church tradition: 1) confusion over the meaning and purpose of worship; 2) passivity in worship; 3) a lack of familiarity with the Christian Year; 4) personality-driven worship; 5) lack of symbols; 5) a loss of meaning and infrequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper⁵.

Though there was no pressure from the congregation at First Church to change the format of Sunday morning worship, the pastoral staff sought to be proactive in exploring the possibility of revitalizing Sunday worship at First Church. This desire was propelled by these issues: 1) to offer worship that is whole-person oriented, which includes the intellect, imagination, emotions,

⁵ For a helpful discussion related to evangelicals recovering the meaning of the sacraments, see Vander Zee.

senses, and kinesthetic; 2) to offer two worship services that were similar, rather than different, and 3) a desire to offer worship that is more conducive to being multi-generational and multi-ethnic.

The pastoral staff enlisted several laypersons to serve as a worship study team to explore future possibilities of worship at First Church.⁶ Soon after this group was formed, an outside facilitator was invited to lead the staff and team in an overnight retreat on the subject of worship. This retreat served as a springboard for the work of the committee that was to follow.

For the next eight months, the worship study group met every two or three weeks and discussed various aspects related to corporate worship. Reading and discussion topics included the following: the theology and practice of worship; postmodernism, and worship and culture.⁷ In addition to reading, this group also spoke with leaders from other churches, visited worship services in other churches, and gathered information from the Internet. As this group met, there was one emerging question that drove the conversation, “What kind of worship helps people encounter God?” (Johnson 29).

Through the eight months of study, the worship ad hoc group gave regular updates to the congregation-at-large. The study group also hosted a couple of town hall gatherings where the congregation could dialog with members of the group and staff. At the end of this period, the consensus of the study group was that First Church should reformat its practice of worship.

⁶ This group used two primary resources to help with the planning process and change, see Herrington, Bonem, and Furr; and Kotter.

⁷ James Emery White has written a concise, helpful theology of worship that would be of benefit for both pastoral staff and laypersons. See also *The Worship Sourcebook* for a theology of worship and worship evaluation tools. For other resources related to the theology and practice of worship, see Dawn; Johnson; Redman; Rognlien; Segler and Bradley; Webber, *Worship*; and Webber, *Planning*; and White. On the topic of the church and postmodernism, see Fitch; Gibbs and Bolger; Smith; Sweet, *Postmodern*; Sweet, *Soul*; and Webber, *Ancient*. Concerning worship and the arts, see Dyrness; and Jensen. Related to the topic of reading culture, see Romanowski; Staub; and Vanhoozer.

Along with the key question (What kind of worship helps people encounter God?), the study group also secured a definition of worship: “Worship is primarily a celebration of God’s mighty deed of salvation accomplished through the living, dying, and rising again of Jesus Christ. Worship tells and enacts the story of God’s victory over the power of evil through Christ” (Webber, *Renewal* 100). This definition provided the group with a concise summary of the meaning and purpose of worship.⁸

Related to the future shape of worship at First Church, the illustration below created a picture of what revitalized worship might “look” like:

As modernity passes, evangelicals must relate to God’s glory in more than just words or propositions. We cannot simply say “Jesus is Lord.” We must embody the truth and reality that “Jesus is Lord.” We must display “Jesus is Lord” through art, rituals, and symbols that submerge the worshiper’s mind, body, and soul into the world that is Scripture. When we do this, the worshiper goes beyond the lecture hall from intellectually engaging the concept of “Jesus is Lord” to being immersed into the world where Jesus *is* Lord (Fitch 110).

Throughout the study process, it did help the group to have a driving question, a working definition of worship, and a vision of what worship might be in the future. Yet, the study group still found it difficult to clarify various issues related to the intersection of worship and culture. The group wrestled with these questions: 1) What are the timeless elements of Christian worship? 2) How much of our culture can we “baptize” for use in worship without undermining

⁸ Tex Sample provides this definition of worship: “Worship is the celebration and dramatization of God’s story. It is the glorification of God as the Gracious Creator, Redeemer, and Ongoing Presence in that story. It is a story of the goodness of creation, of its defilement in sin, of its redemption through Christ, of a community called out to enact and embody that story. . . .” (107).

the essence of the gospel? 3) Should we borrow from other Christian worship experiences found in other cultures?

The template that helped the group grapple with these types of questions is the “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture.”⁹ This document was crafted by the Lutheran World Federation in 1996 in Nairobi, Kenya. The heart of this document discusses worship in relation to culture in four ways: 1) worship as transcultural; 2) worship as contextual; 3) worship as counter-cultural, and 4) worship as cross-cultural. This model helped the study group in sorting out issues related to the practice of worship related to culture¹⁰.

After being immersed for eight months with the topic of corporate worship, the worship study group designed and submitted a proposal to the congregation to revitalize worship at First Church. These are the suggestions: 1) be good story-tellers – use a variety of forms of communication to embody the Story of the gospel; 2) when possible, incorporate ancient worship resources (prayers, creeds, hymns, symbols) in proclaiming God’s story; 3) along with the ancient, seek fresh expressions of faith that relate to our current cultural context – these expressions could be music, dance, visual arts, etc.; 4) when possible, look to the Christian Year when selecting themes for worship; 5) plan worship with an awareness of the four-fold pattern: gathering, proclamation, thanksgiving, sending; 6) add a greater depth of meaning to the Lord’s Supper and increase its frequency in worship; 7) offer worship that is intergenerational and multi-ethnic, 8) provide two worship services that are similar rather than different; 9) involve more people in the worship planning process, 10) develop worship that is communal rather than

⁹ To view the complete “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture” document, go to <<http://www.worship.ca/>>.

¹⁰ For further discussion in regards to worship and culture, see Bevans; and Witvliet (91-123).

individual, and 11) use a myriad of ways to provide ongoing opportunities for the congregation to grow in their understanding of worship .

Agreeing to this proposal, the congregation has successfully transitioned to this new model. Certainly, there have been challenges in transforming to the new format, and it should not be a surprise that this process is ongoing and ever-evolving.

For any congregation seeking to revitalize its worship, Thomas Long provides these four summary statements, which the First Church worship study group would echo:

1) Pastoral leadership is the key to worship renewal. 2) Whenever worship is renewed, some congregational conflict is inevitable. 3) To change worship, significant lay involvement is necessary. 4) Education and publicity help pave the way for worship renewal (107-110).

In this next section, we get a glimpse of how worship at First Church has evolved from word-driven to multi-sensory.

Along with the minister of music, there are five laypersons on the worship planning team:¹¹ Matt, 30-something, who has a master of divinity degree and currently works for a parachurch organization; Dan, in his 50s, a human resources person who has always had an interest in worship; Celeste, 20-something, who is a school teacher with training in dance; Janice, 50-something, an administrative assistant who has responsibility for the worship environment; Kate, in her 30s, an accountant who has a music degree with a concentration in vocal studies.

This group likes to meet at various locations. Their most recent meeting was at Caribou Coffee. Prior to the meeting, the group had sermon themes and scripture references, information about upcoming dates related to the Christian Year, and any pertinent information related to upcoming parent-child dedications, mission team dedications, etc. Of particular interest for this

¹¹ For a helpful resource related to planning worship as a team, see deWaal Malefyt and Vanderwell.

planning meeting was Pentecost Sunday. The celebration of Pentecost Sunday is a relatively new emphasis at First Church. This year, the celebration of Pentecost fell on Memorial Day weekend, which in years past might have been a Sunday that carried patriotic themes. With input from the pastor, the Pentecost celebration will focus on the meaning of being the church.

Because the sanctuary was recently renovated, the congregational seating is now flexible. For Pentecost Sunday, the group decided that the congregation would sit in a circle. The Communion table and the lectern will be placed in the center of the circle. The musicians will lead from one segment of the circle. Related to the environment, the color red will be prominent in the foyer and in the sanctuary. A Pentecost banner created by a local artist will be displayed in the sanctuary. This banner is red and includes the symbols of the dove and fire. The sanctuary has a vaulted ceiling with a pulley system allowing for strips of cloth to be draped over the congregation. For Pentecost, strips of red cloth will blow gently from air conditioning. The bulletin cover for this Sunday will include the image of a boat (an ancient symbol of the church), which was created for the church by an artist in Portland, Oregon.

Though the church does not celebrate Communion every Sunday, it will be included for Pentecost Sunday. Groups of around 20 will gather around the table and serve one another the Bread and the Cup. All during Communion, the congregation is singing songs of praise and thanksgiving

The musical instrumentation for most worship services is piano, synthesizer, electronic organ with both traditional and contemporary sounds, bass guitar, acoustic guitar, electric lead guitar, drums, percussion, and trumpet and saxophone. On most Sundays, the congregational songs are a mix of traditional hymns, gospel songs, and contemporary praise and worship songs.

The arrangements vary from traditional to contemporary to jazz-tinged. Worship is also aided by a small group of vocalists as well as a choir.

Finally, listed below are six questions that have helped the worship planning team in crafting holistic worship services at First Church:

1. How will this experience make people *feel*?
2. Will this order of service cause worshipers to *think*?
3. What will worshipers *see* in this service?
4. What will worshipers *hear*?
5. What sensations of *taste* and *scent* will be present?
6. Will worshipers be able to sense the holy by their *touch*? (Gaddy and Nixon, 22).

CONCLUSION

These certainly are challenging times to serve in a church ministry setting. Change of various shapes and sizes is all around us. Yet, as we progress through this first decade of the 21st century, these turbulent times offer the Protestant church an opportunity to recast its philosophy and practice of Christian worship. Though some within the Church view postmodernism as a challenge or even a threat to the very existence of Christianity, we believe that the sovereign God can actually use postmodernism as a refining fire, molding the Church even more into the likeness of the Trinitarian God.

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