

## WORSHIP IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

*By David Miller*

We are on the heels of a new postmodern world that has been called “The Second Reformation” by some. Many churches have jumped on this bandwagon and caught the vision while others either struggle to breakthrough to this new worldview or resist it completely as a soon-to-pass fad.

What does all of this mean for today’s Christian church? What impact does postmodernism have on the way we “do church”? What is worship supposed to look like in a postmodern world? Do we really need to do anything differently or should we “build it and they will come”? This paper will attempt to shed light on these questions and will give some overview as to what is being said and done about worship in a postmodern world.

Maggi Dawn, a United Kingdom theologian and pastor, claims, “You have to change to stay the same. In short, when we use the same form and language in worship, their meaning actually changes over time and becomes irrelevant”. Dawn believes that the challenge for the Church is, “...to engage thoroughly with the ancient and reinterpret it through the culture we now live (because) relevance is a thorough understanding of our tradition and a genuine ‘placedness’ in our cultural situation.” But she cautions that this is no superficial task. “To be trendy has little or nothing to do with being relevant... To imagine that we can marry objective truth together with a cosmetic, surface understanding of our culture is a recipe for disaster. We have to inhabit our culture (that’s what being human is) to interpret the eternal truths.”

Two big questions for postmoderns are: What is truth? And how can I experience God in a communal setting? Interestingly enough, this same question of truth was raised in Jesus’ day. The story of Jesus being questioned by Pilate illustrates the mentality of postmoderns as told in John 18:37-38. “Pilate then said to him, ‘Are you a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say it that I am a king. To this end I was born, and for this cause I came into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.’ Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’” (emphasis mine).

Regardless of the type of worship service your church will have, its main purpose is to answer this vital question and show people that Jesus is the real truth. This must be the ultimate goal, but not everyone agrees it’s that simple. Well-known prison evangelist, Chuck Colson says, “People are beginning to realize postmodern presuppositions simply don’t work. And what are those presuppositions? Postmodernists claim we can have no ‘grand metanarrative’ that makes sense of reality. Since there’s no such thing as truth, all principles are merely personal preferences. If one’s worldview is true, it has to conform to reality—to our real-life experiences”. Then let us make sure that postmoderns have a real-life experience with the Truth—Jesus Christ—who can transform their worldview but more importantly, transform their heart.

If we are going to help people encounter God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, we will have to inhabit our culture at a much deeper level than has been suggested over the years. We are going to have to go much farther than pop praise choruses, sitcom dramas, token prayers, and how-to messages. Peter demonstrates in Acts 17:28 that even the poets of his day were utilized to tell of Jesus. This will need to become our norm: faith communities that utilize the “outside world” to enhance and further worship of the Creator. Examples include poets, the stories, the films, the music, and mindset of our time.

Maggi Dawn continues, “Creating sacred space in our postmodern culture - a place of

discontinuous change, deconstructed stories, decimated hope, knee-jerk irony, and ubiquitous self-doubt - will mean both unprecedented listening and uncompromised liturgy". This means we will need to engage all of the senses. Church can no longer be a "spectator sport". We cannot continue with a "ministering to" paradigm. We must "minister with". It is this paradox that will occupy our learning with each other. The Bible tells us to love the Lord with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. I think we must be positioned to make this happen in our worship services.

Noted author and speaker, Sally Morgenthaler says, "My passion is engaging postmodern people with God in ways that transform, not just inform; ways that honor diverse learning styles and aesthetic languages; and lastly, not only relevance, but the essence of historic, Christian worship: engagement with the God Incarnate in Jesus Christ". As we have rounded the bend of this millennium, people are grasping for the sacred. The question is, how can we as the Church help with this transformation, this engagement with God? We must always remember that it is God who does the transforming. We cannot do it ourselves but I believe we can "prepare the way" for transformation to take place.

There are some cautions of the postmodernity culture as a part of worship. We mustn't just accept the culture and let it blindly lead us but we should not be afraid of it either. Youth pastor Esther Jing Hua Wu makes a strong statement about this. She says, "The danger of postmodern Christianity is that we become so focused on making God culturally relevant, hip, cool, and fun, that we run the risk of making the gospel about us—our experiences, our relationships, our needs, our worship preferences, our lives. When this happens we lose our awe of God's holiness. If we spend so much time relating to God as personal friend, we lose sight of the holiness of the God who inspires fear, wonder, worship, and beauty all at once. When that happens, our proclamation of the gospel tips dangerously towards self-centeredness and our experience of God; and the way we want to connect with the holy becomes more important than God himself".

The postmodern emphasis on experience, presentation, and narrative has enhanced our faith richly in many ways. However, experience and narrative are by no means the beginning or ending points of our faith in Christ. God's holiness is. While postmoderns want to experience God, Wu cautions, "We're in danger of making the experience, multimedia presentations, or liturgy the centerpiece of our faith. And the result is an experience-based faith instead of one that is holiness-based. Ultimately, this kind of faith will crumble. Our calling as followers of Jesus is to ground our faith in his God-ness, which rests outside our experience".

Let's not be afraid of the questions postmoderns are asking such as "What is truth?" or "What makes your God so special?". We should welcome them and be thankful they are searching. Who knows, maybe there is something we've missed along the way. Remember Copernicus? He was the guy who dared suggest that the earth was a round moving ball when the Bible clearly said that it was flat and stationary (e.g. Isaiah 5:26, Psalm 104:5, Joshua 10:13). Proponents of his views were made to recant or were burned at the stake for heresy. I wonder if there are biblical truths we cling to that fall into the same category. The day we claim to own the street corner on how to do worship is the day that we've limited God or made ourselves to be gods.

In some ways, the modern world has limited God. Youth worker Gareth Brandt says, "At the same time, however, the relationship to the world that modern science fostered and shaped now appears to have exhausted its potential. It is increasingly clear that, strangely, the

relationship is missing something. It fails to connect with the most intrinsic nature of reality, and with natural human experience. Man as an observer is becoming completely alienated from himself as a being." As science has come full circle and has begun to disprove itself, postmoderns are looking to community for the answers.

Brandt continues, "And thus today we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. We enjoy all the achievements of modern civilization that have made our physical existence on this earth easier in so many important ways. Yet we do not know exactly what to do with ourselves, where to turn. People must turn to the church. Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and less. In short, we live in the postmodern world, where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain."

Notice Brandt says "almost" nothing is certain. I submit that it is up to the church to provide that one certainty that humankind is searching for – a real, life-changing relationship with truth, the Truth.

What has worship typically looked like over the years? Let's begin with the modern view. According to author Andrew Jones, it's layered like pancakes. He says, "Our human world is overlapped by God's eternal world. Our time and God's time - layered like pancakes. The layer of human choice and the layer of God's intervention, separate and yet dancing together, Jesus being fully God and fully man - at the same time. It is in the arena of worship where we see the playing out of these two different ways of seeing reality. Church services in the modern world were organized around one item at a time. A prayer. Then a testimony. Then the announcements. Then a hymn. Then the sermon. All joined together by a phrase that you will hear only on plane flights and in churches: "And now, at this time, we . . ."

Maybe the new view of worship should be more like spaghetti. Jones continues, "Rather than being a series of events that are linked together in a chronologically progressive fashion, the elements of worship are curated in a multi-layered collection of moments that embrace all the senses, all at the same time." It is a way of worshipping where we no longer ask how long we can go but rather how deep or high we can go.

How do we engage people using cultural methods without sacrificing the importance of the gospel message? The "sacred space" postmoderns are searching for starts way outside the church sanctuary. Postmoderns' engagement with God typically does not begin in a building. It begins in relationship. Our explicit theology raises the question, "What kind of God and what kind of people will I encounter here?" It's interesting that so many churches that are appealing to postmoderns have gone "back" to hymns, biblical narrative, corporate readings, litanies, meditation, silence, and candle-lighting, to name a few. Author Robert Jenson says, "Since our congregations are linked to all God's people throughout space and time, we need both continuity with our heritage and constant reformation using new forms and words and musical styles".

What is the point of entry into our congregations? Is it traditional or contemporary worship styles? It's neither – it's you! Worship is not to be the point of entry. Worship is to be directed toward God. Relationship is the key. According to Rick Warren, worship is a lifestyle. When postmoderns see how you live each day (producing the fruit of the Spirit), and hear your story of authenticity, they will want what you've got.

The truth that the church has to offer people caught in the postmodern condition must be shared in all its wholeness. Christians must humbly suggest a non-oppressive, all-inclusive story of the true God who creates, redeems, and liberates from bondages. Our worship needs

to be structured as richly and deeply as possible, so that we never lose sight of the fact that God is the One who enables us to come to worship and the One who receives our praise. We are to worship with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Our worship must contain nothing but the truth through music, songs, scripture, poetry, and sermons.

Brandt says, "Teens want to experience truth; they want to see faith in action". The Bible says faith without works is dead.

So, what should worship in a postmodern world look like? Bottom line – it must be real. It must be experiential, participatory, image-based and communal. Are we watering down the gospel message? Not if we truly understand what and who the gospel message is about. Remember, worship is not about you, it's about God. We must lovingly and patiently show people the Truth and remember that God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Cultures change but Truth does not.

#### **END NOTES:**

1 Dawn, Maggi, Triangle p. 39

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