

WORSHIP IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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Summary:

This paper briefly outlines the various developments of postmodern thinking around community, relativism and personal experience. Practical advice is given as to how to worship God appropriately in this kind of context.

Length: 16 pages

Worship in a Postmodern Context

I. Introduction

Postmodernism is an observable shift in thinking in developed countries and has caused both fear and excitement, anger and hope. It has been quietly eroding the foundations of what today we would call 'traditional church worship', while at the same time longing for meaningful tradition. It has isolated individuals in the midst of a pop-culture that craves real community. This paper will review the orientation of the movement, examine its positive and negative impact on worship, and consider some applications.

Definitions

- Church: the catholic identity of those belonging to Jesus Christ.
- church: a particular group as a subset of the Church, organized and interacting as a community.
- creed: a statement of beliefs.
- mystery: any knowledge or experience which is unknown.
- postmodernism: an intellectual mood which is described by sociologists, historians, and philosophers.
- ritual: an action which is prescribed as part of a worship tradition.
- symbol: any sensory pattern which repeatedly arouses a particular set of cognitions in a recipient.
- tradition: any practice which a community perpetuates as a meaningful expression of its identity and purpose.
- the Word: the Bible.
- worship: that activity which is a conscious offering to God in response to His' nature and works.

II. Limitations

This paper will not attempt to prove which factors are responsible for postmodernism, nor will it make any assumptions about the scope or length of the observable trend. Furthermore, all discussion about the impact of postmodernism will be from the perspective of a North American congregation; while the discussion has

application for all churches, the extreme diversity of the Church in North America must be recognized in any application of these principles.

III. Historical Review of Postmodernism

In an overview of the philosophical roots of postmodernism, Stanley Grenz suggests that the Enlightenment's inscription of the human mind as the "arbiter of truth" eventually led to the conclusion that all is "perspectival appearance".¹ By the 20th century, the prominent philosophers of postmodernism would see language as merely 'self-referential' and not corresponding to reality.² Without a "transcendent center to reality as a whole", the process of interpreting is essentially a subjective assertion of power.³ The slide from anthropocentric modernism to the fracturing of community and a perceptual relativism may be reflected in the writings of philosophers, but it is doubtful if it originated there.

With an ever growing list of attributes, postmodernism has become a 10-headed monster. This paper will review three basic aspects of the movement under which specific attributes will be discussed; they are (1) a search for community, (2) a belief in relativism, and (3) an experiential orientation.

Search for Community

The fracturing of society has many causes, but the result is an increasing sense of isolation. Marva Dawn concluded: "technological factors that reduce skills of intimacy

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 63-91. Kant assumed that the 'self' was universal, but Nietzsche rejected universalism and taught that all is 'perspectival appearance'.

² Ibid., pp. 133-160. For Michel Foucault, language "is always an act of violence" (p.133); for Jacques Derrida wanted to put an end to an effort to find meaning in words (pp.141-6, and Richard Rorty emphasized its purposes for a particular group (pp.151-60).

³ Ibid., p. 6.

keep many from knowing how to relate to their family and friends.”⁴ One does not need to be technical to recognize that noise drowns out meaningful conversations with one another and the Lord.⁵ The information age has allowed for radically privatized experiences to exist, even in the same family. The “family, community, or religious tradition” no longer validates private experience, resulting in an impersonal society.⁶ This interpersonal deprivation has left a thirst for community, often sought in quite impersonal ways (like cyber relationships).

Relativism

This postmodern social experience is perhaps the major contributor to a belief in relativism. Pluralism results in conflicting images and ideas made available through mass media, making it “difficult to sort into the true and the false, the meaningful and the meaningless, the consequential and the trivial.”⁷ In a conflicting cultural world, without a common *something* “inscribed on the consciousness”, Farley suggests there is no way to make sense of things.⁸ Combine this pluralism with the forms of communication which are non-contextual, and the human mind is further challenged to piece together through reflection.⁹ Philosophically stated, the belief in relativism is a rejection of authority, for

⁴ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 27.

⁵ Larry W. Poland, "Christ and Culture: The Christian and the Media," in *God & Culture*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp.264-5.

⁶ David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), p.203.

⁷ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against The Challenges Of Postmodernism*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 54,57.

⁸ Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation*, (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 11-12. This is termed “multiphrenia”, a state of consciousness that results in anxiety.

⁹ Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children And Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), pp. 165, 171. Many others have suggested mental dysfunction is the result of pop-cultures media (see Marva Dawn, Jacques Ellul , Neil Postman).

without God there is no one who can declare what is universal. This results in the transfer of meaning from the public to the private realm as already discussed, with ‘truth’ being merely what serves the purposes of a particular community.

Experiential Orientation

The rejection of the Enlightenment’s deification of reason has also resulted in the abandonment of language as a vehicle of truth. This is evident in an appetite for sensory experience, that which is artistic, symbolic, and non-abstract. Farley points out that contemporary society is attracted to “pseudo-enchantments”, to “fantasy and fairy tales, dinosaurs, UFOs, [and] the occult.”¹⁰ Apparently society is looking for the right-brain to find what the left could not on its own.

IV. The Impact of Postmodernism on Worship

This section will examine how this search for community, relativism, and experiential orientation has impacted worship both positively and negatively. The Church has obviously struggled with how to be missional while being counter cultural.

Search for Community

Beginning with the positive impact, the Church is by definition and potentiality a ‘real’ community, despite the fact that it has sometimes lost its identity as a radical counterculture.¹¹ The desire for community may be reviving an interest in ecclesiology,¹² and the accessibility of various traditions has provided the opportunity to share them.¹³

¹⁰ Farley, p.4.

¹¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), p. 165.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 74-77.

¹³ Robert Phillips, "Changes in Technology," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 42 no 3 (Sum 2000), p. 64.

On the negative side, communities seem even more fractured than ever. Farley points out the problem: “Those who belong to church congregations are the same ones who fill the shopping malls and rock concerts and imbibe the multiple worlds of television.”¹⁴ The influence of pop-culture is seen in quick sermons,¹⁵ lack of silence, and media-style leadership personalities. The proliferation of music and books allows each person to have their own artists, style, authors, even their own translation of the Bible.

Relativism

What positive impact has relativism had on worship? One of the precursors to relativism, the recognition that language has the power to shape us as a community, could be construed as a positive development if we embrace the Word of God as our authority. Otherwise, the belief in the possibility of orthodoxy—as a consensus sustained over time—is no longer a basic assumption. Working backwards through the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernism, it is clear that any universal truth depends on a correspondence between words and reality.

This is significant because some would say the abandonment of propositionally stated truth is a positive outcome. Douglas Groothuis argues that this confuses “the *effect* of God’s revelation with its *nature* when they claim that revelation comes through the community of faith and the experience of Christians.”¹⁶ The nature of truth he describes as “exclusive, specific and antithetic....What is true excludes all that opposes it.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Farley, p. 27.

¹⁵ Hugh Litchfield, "Changes in Preaching," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 42 no 3 (Sum 2000), p.27. “Listening to a long sermon will not be welcomed”, at least that is the common perception!

¹⁶ Groothuis, p. 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.75.

Access to this truth may not be mechanistic, but it is possible because God has chosen language as the vehicle, as Goothuis states: “Human language has been wounded by the fall and fractured by the judgment at Babel (Gen. 11), but it is not thrown down for the count.”¹⁸ The need for a God-inspired word does not reduce the amount of mystery—what is unknown—except perhaps for the person who “thinks he knows something” (1Cor. 8:2). The word hides as much as it reveals. Dawn writes, “What we should avoid is letting our language turn from the truths of God revealed in God’s Word to our human adaptations that reduce those truths.”¹⁹

If the Church abandons the belief that God reveals truth through human language, then the only thing left is the tradition which belongs to the community. Webber has put his faith in the ‘rule of faith’ of the early centuries, with faith originating in mystery rather than the spoken and written message.²⁰ What is left is a variety of Rorty’s pragmatism, as Webber sees the ‘ultimate’ meaning of the text as answering the question, “What is its life-giving element?”²¹ This is consistent with the postmodern movement from Theo-centric to anthropocentric sermons,²² and while no one would argue the

¹⁸ Goothuis, p. 66. Similarly, Marva Dawn quotes Gertrude Himmelfarb (p.37): “Where modernists, aware of the obstacles in the way of objectivity, take this as a challenge and make a strenuous effort to attain as much objectivity and unbiased truth as possible, postmodernists take the rejection of absolute truth as deliverance from all truth.” Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Tradition and Creativity in the Writings of History,” *First Things* 27 (Nov. 1992): 30.

¹⁹ Dawn, p. 226. What completely reduces the inspired Word to human adaptation is the process described by Farley: ‘god-terms’ are enchanted by originating in the sphere of human interdependency and while important are not seen as universal (pp. 21, 39, 124).

²⁰ Webber, pp. 178-184.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.190. This form of canonical criticism is promoted by James Sanders. What makes a writing canonical is how it functions for the community. Robert W. Wall and Eugene E. Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon: A Reader in Canonical Criticism*, in *JSOT Supp. Ser. 76*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 32.

²² Wells, pp. 251-2. Note the corresponding removal of the pulpit; Litchfield, p. 32-3.

irrelevance of Scripture to the Church's needs, this perspective certainly does not line up with what the Word itself says, as will be discussed in the next section.

Experiential Orientation

The shift toward a right-brain orientation has resulted in a positive recognition of the whole human experience.²³ The two extreme positions, that worship is either about sacraments or preaching, has in many instances become a unified approach where “preaching serves worship”.²⁴ Preaching itself has also become more inductive and organic, with an emphasis on narratives, and is often presented in a conversational style.²⁵ This effort to be holistic is requiring a creational emphasis and a recognition of the significant role the imagination has in our cognition. A. W. Tozer saw the need:

“The Bible will never be a living Book to us until we are convinced that God is articulate in His universe. To jump from a dead, impersonal world to a dogmatic Bible is too much for most people....He tried to think of God as mute everywhere else and vocal only in a book....With notions like that in our heads how can we believe?”²⁶

“I long to see the imagination released from its prison and given its proper place among the sons of the new creation. What I am trying to describe here is the sacred gift of seeing, the ability to peer beyond the veil and gaze with astonished wonder upon the beauties and mysteries of things holy and eternal.”²⁷

The call to recognize the power of the imagination is both an approach that embraces word and sacrament together. Recognition that the Church of the classical period

²³ Robert, E. Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume Two: Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, (Nashville: StarSong Publishing Group, 1994), p. 372; The right side is described as “symbolic and creative”. Cedric B. Johnson, *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983): 52; Johnson's comparison of *Word*-orientation with *Spirit*-orientation found (not surprisingly) that the latter are more global and intuitive.

²⁴ Litchfield, pp. 23-5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.30-5. A style which “seeks to have an important conversation with another.”

²⁶ A. W. Tozer, "The Pursuit of God," in *The Best of A. W. Tozer: Book One*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978), p. 25-6.

²⁷ A. W. Tozer, "Born After Midnight," in *The Best of A. W. Tozer: Book One*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978), p.51.

emphasized participation through rituals does not mean that words were not part of those rituals, being as bones under the flesh.²⁸ Eugene Peterson has articulated how the experiential side of cognition works together with the abstract: “The word is creative: it brings into being what was not there before—perception, relationship, belief....Out of the blank abyss a picture is formed by means of metaphor: people see what they did not see before and are changed.”²⁹

The emotional is also an essential element of being human and being spiritual.³⁰ Thomas Hohstadt takes on the issue of discerning which emotions are ‘spiritual’, encouraging that Christianity does not reject emotions as other religions.³¹ Natural emotion is described as a ‘monologue’ because “it only talks to itself”, with desires that are opposed to the Holy Spirit.³² Yet even when the Church learns to discern and embrace spiritual emotion, Hohstadt reminds: “It may provide evidence of Truth, but it is not the Truth. It may reveal its Source, but it is not the Source. It may burn with delirious fervor, but it is not proof of spiritual integrity.”³³ For those who have made human experience the source of truth, this postmodern trend has had negative consequences.

²⁸ Webber, p. 24. This is not to say that rituals and symbols need to be explained or accompanied by teaching, but posits that to be a truly holistic human experience they need to connect with words in the imagination.

²⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 45.

³⁰ The saying goes, “You can be emotional without being spiritual, but you can’t be spiritual without being emotional.”

³¹ Thomas Hohstadt, *I Felt God...I Think: Authentic Passion in the 21st Century*, (Odessa, Texas: Damah Media, 2001), p. 17.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 169. Jing-Hua Wu warns of the danger of making our experience of God the goal, stating, “our experience is ultimately not the anchor of our faith.” Esther Jing-Hua Wu, “The Danger of Postmodernism: Making the Gospel about Us,” *Youthworker* (Nov/Dec 2003): (par. 4-5). [on-line]; www.youthspecialties.com, accessed 17 Nov. 2003.

The gospel of John seems to highlight the danger of relying on sight at the exclusion of hearing His words. After the Jews supposedly believed in Him because of the signs they had seen, Jesus went to Samaria, where they “believed in Him because of *the word* of the woman...(and) because of His own *word*” (Jn. 4:39-41). Then again with the Jews of Galilee he declares, “unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe” (Jn. 4:48), for “if you do not believe his (Moses’) writings, how will you believe My words?” (Jn. 5:47). We must be careful not to be the evil and adulterous generation that is seeking the visible when we do not believe what He has spoken (Mt. 12:38-39). To live, it is not only necessary to experience eating God’s bread, but every word which comes from His mouth (Mt. 4:4).

Much of what Evangelical churches have called worship has been described as having the flavor of experience that centers on personal feelings. In an article critiquing ‘P&W’, D. G. Hart suggests that what motivates the choice of P&W is what makes people feel good--what brings them ‘back for more’--which results in them “worshiping their emotions”.³⁴ It is a criticism that the Church needs to hear, without reacting with a conservatism that rejects emotions, the imagination, or the arts. This challenge equally applies to the preaching of the Word, as Dawn writes: “Sermons cannot form the character of believers when sin is treated merely as an addiction and redemption is only therapy. The believer’s new life in Christ must be based on Christ’s objective work of redemption, not on our experience of it.”³⁵

³⁴ D. G. Hart, "Post-modern Evangelical Worship," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 457-8. Hart blames the Church’s effort to make the gospel accessible for this wedding with popular culture.

³⁵ Dawn, p. 210.

V. Potential Contemporary Applications

The challenge for the Church is to be a real community in the midst of a ‘non-community’, to speak universal truth, *and* to welcome the experiential. This section will explore possible applications to the three influences under consideration.

Search for Community

Possibly the greatest challenge is to be a set apart (holy) community in a world that is pulling in as many directions as there are voices. There is a reason why churches with a ‘high-commitment membership model’ are growing. Churches such as Saddleback Community Church dare to ask for commitment, which is one way to “restore the sense that a relationship with Christ demands radical obedience.”³⁶ How else can we communicate the primacy of our Lord’s Family if we do not ask for members to be make commitments? This is usually done through membership classes which articulate expectations, and in some cases with written covenants. Some form of public induction/welcome into the community can facilitate this. Leaders also need to charge each person to take seriously the Scriptural commands to encourage one another daily, providing creative opportunities for interaction on personal issues.³⁷

A second need is for the Church to have a clear sense of purpose and identity. Members need to know who they are and why they are involved. This can be accomplished through symbols (logos), creedal statements of belief, purpose and vision statements, and of course participation in activities that are directed by that vision.

³⁶ Webber, p. 150. Thom Rainer found that the formerly unchurched were five times more likely to remain involved if active in Sunday school; *Surprising Insights*.

³⁷ This can be done easily in small groups of all types, with questions to be answered each week such as those the Korean men here ask each other at their weekly prayer meeting. Examples: “From your Scripture reading, what word or phrase seemed most significant to you for your relationship with Jesus?...Have you damaged another person by your words, either behind their back or face to face?...How much time did you spend in prayer & meditation this past week?...Have you just lied to us?”!!!!

Traditions can be significant in communicating participation in something much greater than the present moment and the local church. Liturgy requires careful planning so the form “actually frees worship participants to focus on God without being distracted by either novelty or monotony.”³⁸

Relativism

The Church has no option but to deal with popular culture and to figure out how to creatively present the Word. It is often suggested that we teach our youth how to be discerning of culture,³⁹ which does not go far enough. *If* there were some foundation still in tact, and *if* the stream of information were slow enough and coherent enough to be sorted out, then all we would need to do is teach critical thinking. Hohstadt suggests that since every form of art is ‘virtual reality’—being beyond ourselves—that therefore the “kaleidoscope of sensory images” can be made virtuous.⁴⁰ In principle perhaps, yet he fails to note that we do not live in a painting. Sensory information must be contextual in order to be coherent. I believe the Church needs to ask its members to step back and consider the spiritual habits of silence, ‘holy reading’, meditation, appreciating the beauty of creation, and even conversation.

The second key response will be to encourage the hearing of the Word in the way true disciples hear it. When Peter wanted to meet with Jesus on the sea, he said, “Command me to come to you” (Mt. 14:28), believing that Jesus’ word conveyed authority *and* power. This is how Christians in the premodern era approached the

³⁸ Dawn, p. 246. “What is important is that liturgy give a sense that the whole Church is present in it” (p. 255).

³⁹ Garth Friesen, “PoMo-phobia: The Fear of Postmodernity,” *Youthworker* (Nov/Dec 2003): (par. 6). [on-line]; www.youthspecialties.com, accessed 17 Nov. 2003. Suggests teaching how to critique instead of shutting it out.

⁴⁰ Hohstadt, pp. 5-6.

Scriptures, believing God's Words to be true *and* authoritative.⁴¹ How can we encourage a God-fearing attitude towards the Scriptures? We can ask the congregation to stand when it is read. We can come to it with a single mind--to obey it--rather than to stand over and scrutinize it. We can encourage meditation. We can present clear teaching with absolutes.⁴² We can ask how our current worship practices and songs relate to specific passages and be willing to change them.

Experiential Orientation

The Church needs to speak the language of the heart, the word picture, poetry, metaphor, the sensory, and the symbolic.⁴³ The Church must continue to adapt to artistic and visual forms of communication, being careful to present our offerings with the beauty that is fitting for a God of beauty. This means being discretionary as to what is adapted from popular culture.⁴⁴ While the opportunity for re-commissioning traditions from the past is one option to consider, I believe that creativity ought to abound in our churches, just as it has in the music industry in recent years.⁴⁵

In the postmodern context I believe the Church needs to take a truly holistic approach and avoid the extreme orientations, as Marva Dawn summed up:

⁴¹ Approaching Scriptures with faith does not mean that we stop working at understanding what it meant and what it means. It does mean that we will get out of the boat when we hear the clear command.

⁴² Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights From The Unchurched*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); The number one reported reason why formerly unchurched people choose a particular church is the pastor and his/her preaching, closely followed by 'doctrines'.

⁴³ Hohstadt, pp. 188-196; Hohstadt is really idealistic by presenting the introduction of new language as the key to the future. We must get their attention amidst competition.

⁴⁴ The medium may not be the message, but it can sure cheapen it. Dawn wrote: "Beautiful worship will foster in our character genuine humility in the recognition of our sinful ugliness, a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty of forgiveness, and profound thanksgiving that God invites us to share in the heavenly beauty of which we get glimpses while here on earth" (p. 249).

⁴⁵ As mentioned before, this requires careful planning so that liturgy is not too novel, resulting in distraction from God and loss of community identity.

“We must avoid the dangers of both intellectualism and emotionalism. To focus on the mind alone won’t engage the people’s will and heart so that they act on what they know. To focus exclusively on training the emotions encourages faith without substance. Genuine worship corrects both extremes.”⁴⁶

VI. Potential Personal Applications

The above conclusions and potential corporate applications directly translate for me into personal mandates. As a leader, and relying on the Holy Spirit’s direction, I will strive to call those who profess faith to be radically committed to Christ’s family, equipping members with the tools and contexts with which to relate and work together. It will require ongoing evaluation of liturgy, traditions, practices, music, doctrinal creeds, fellowship, and symbols.⁴⁷

To counter relativism, I want to directly challenge people to immerse themselves in Christ rather than popular culture, introducing them to spiritual disciplines, and I desire to elevate God’s Word in their minds as the bearing His authority and not as merely another story to be enjoyed or scrutinized. This again is a personal mandate to sanctify His Word in my heart so that I will model the fear of God that I want to foster in others.

It is also my intention to feed our experiential and emotional existence with the sights, sounds, smells, and actions that will help us to ‘know’ God holistically and comprehend our place in His ‘creationally shaped’ redemptive history. It is impossible to state what I hope will be creative, but will likely include use of PowerPoint slides, outdoor services, drama, and participation in liturgy. May God help us!

⁴⁶ Dawn, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Probably the greatest challenge is in leading *people* through alterations that in such a way that they will welcome them.

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