

POSTMODERN WORSHIP: DECLARING WHOSE WORTH?

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Picture yourself in a worship service where the Lord's Supper is about to be served. Parading before you are several members of the congregation, casually dressed, carrying bowls of assorted items: wine, bread, earth, water, flowers, medical instruments, watches and clocks. On the walls around you are projected many images, in both still and motion pictures, running or changing at various speeds, as synthesized music increases in volume. Now, the "worshippers" rise and receive the communion from the twelve laypersons including a pregnant woman in spandex.

Are you at a commune in the sixties, hanging out with Jesus Freaks? No, it is the nineties and you are in what is reported to be a postmodern worship service in an Anglican Church in England. This service is, according to "J," a friendly member of the "welcome team," the result of people not being able to get what they wanted out of the orthodox church services, and striking out on their own.

Flexibility or Sin?

There are three key words in the postmodern approach to worship: want, innovation, and fulfillment. Whatever else may be required, these three things must be satisfied. The tragic thing is that this trinity of human desires has replaced the requirements of the Holy Trinity in worship. It is probably safe to say that Cain was the first postmodern worshipper, and though the term is considered quite "cutting edge," the general concept is nothing new. Cain, like so many today, was more interested in what he wanted to give to God than what God wanted from him.

The general feeling among postmodern worship-thinkers is that worship should reflect the dynamics of an ever changing culture, rather than the commands of a never changing God. In LEADERSHIP NETWORK (NetFAX: Number 92, March 2, 1998) we are told, "Generation X and the Millennial Generation are the first generations of this post-modern world and reflect the front line of cultural changes. Ministry to these generations in this transitional period is also changing and is moving from national models to more organic and regional models."

The organic model, which is then detailed in the article, is all about how men think and how worship paradigms must meet these changing cultural dynamics. At times, reading the proposals and plans of contemporary worship thinkers gives you the surreal feeling you are in a Madison Avenue boardroom. They speak of warmth and engagement in the worship process, but they sound like mind-numbed robots regurgitating a list of buzzwords, and in the end they bring to worship the offerings of Cain. In a report on a meeting of postmodern worship leaders we find this strange

combination:

Worship times, led by teams from churches in Washington, Colorado and California, were rich, sweet and varied. Ancient Scottish hymns, raucous thundering songs of lament and praise, candles and incense created a holy atmosphere, calling participants to a full sensory worship experience. Theologians and practitioners dialogued about their common journeys on these uncharted paths of cultural change. They shared their struggles and insights on ministering in a society transitioning from learning primarily by proclamation and rational presentation to one where narrative storytelling, in its many forms, is the primary learning mode. (Ibid.)

This is not to say that there is no place for examining our traditions and practices. Robert Dabney, in his essay on the "Theories of the Eldership" observes, "Each generation must do its own thinking, and learn for itself its own lessons in first truths and general principles. If we insist that this generation of Presbyterians shall hold our fathers' principles on trust, and by mere prescription, the result will be that they will not hold them sincerely at all." To this all thinking men can agree; the problem comes when we begin to consider how to proceed from here. Dr. Dabney's view was simple: in-depth, careful, and exhaustive study of two things, the Scriptures and history.

There is a pathetic arrogance that seems to pervade postmodern thinking. The starting premise appears to be, "The ways of the past do not satisfy me; therefore, the ways of the past are corrupt, antiquated, useless, dead tradition and need to be abandoned." The idea that the problem might lie with them seems totally foreign to the postmodern worshipper. When pressed, especially on the layman's level, most postmodern thinkers have no idea why their fathers in the faith worshipped the way they did, and they suspect the sincerity of their earnestness, often assuming it was as culturally driven as their own desires. It assumes the bankruptcy of past worship forms without any examination of the topic, believing themselves to be the first to really return to the Scriptures and search out the primitive worship found there.

The very idea that believers who preceded this generation may have had a faith that so transcended that known by the postmodern worshipper, that he could not begin to grasp it, seems to be beyond his imagination. He is convinced that man can only have a meaningful worship experience if it addresses his wants, his thirst for innovation, and offers him a feeling of personal fulfillment.

In the following quote from Harriet Beecher Stowe, she describes the experience of Puritan worship in a New England church while singing Psalm 78:

The services opened by the national Puritan psalm: "Let children hear the mighty deeds, Which God performed of old, Which in our younger years we saw, And which our fathers told."

The wild warble of "St. Martin's," the appointed tune whose wings bore

these words, swelled and billowed and reverberated through the house, carrying with it that definable thrill which always fills a house when deep emotions are touched deepest among people habitually reserved and reticent of outward demonstration. It was this solemn undertone, this mysterious, throbbing sub-bass of repressed emotion, which gave the power and effect to the Puritan music.

It is disingenuous to say that we are going to study worship, without sincerely examining this “experience.” It provides a glimpse into worship that has nothing to do with smells, flavors, and organic models. It focuses not on man, but on God, and what He was doing among those people, so that they were so moved, and yet so restrained under the Holy Spirit. This is the kind of worship that is modeled in the Scriptures: depth of love under control (Deut. 11:13-17 & John 15: 10-11).

“Improving” Worship

The inroads of postmodern thought are subtle and the doors to it are sometimes unknowingly opened. At times, the only way it can be identified is by comparison. This is not meant in any way to be an attack on the contemporary author quoted, we merely offer this as an example of how these trends can begin to find a niche from which to pry their way into the Church.

Here is a quote from a reliable, contemporary book on prayer: “How can we improve our prayers? What can we do to make communication with God more central and more fulfilling?” Here is one from George Swinnock on the same subject, but written in the mid-1600s:

The infinite and glorious God, though lie be so high that He “humbles Himself to behold things in heaven,” and so holy that “the heavens are unclean in his sight,” is yet so gracious that He condescends to, and converses with, poor sinful dust and ashes. In this duty, the children of God whisper him in the ear, open their minds, and unbosom themselves to Him, as his infinite friends and favorites.

Notice the one starts with *we*, the other with *God*. The one seeks self-improvement; the other engenders high thoughts of God. And finally, the one makes it sound like a company project handed down from the main office, while the other makes prayer out to be a delightful and encouraging duty which we owe to God and are privileged to be able to participate in.

There is no question which one of these appeals to the generation that is concerned with its wants, its innovative imagination, and its personal fulfillment. But it is just as clear which one is designed to take God’s will into consideration first and foremost.

The Attack on God's Word

Postmodernism's attack on the worship and polity of the Church, either deliberately or circumstantially, is actually an attack on the Scriptures. It undermines the God ordained leadership of the Church, incorporating lay "leaders" in every facet, who will be accountable, but only to each other. While this appeals to the postmodern mind, it runs contrary to the mind of God on the order of the Church (2 Chron. 26:16-21). It may bother men and women that there are elders in the Church and that they are endowed with both authority and responsibility, but this is the manifest will of God (1 Tim. 3:1-15; Heb. 13:7, 17). Strange fires intrigue men, but they insult God (Lev. 10:1-3). The idea of burning incense to God fashioned by the imagination of man, appeals to man, but it is declared to be an abomination by God (Exodus 30:9).

Jeremiah Burroughs writes in his *Gospel Worship*:

Now when a man shall put a religious respect upon a thing by virtue of his own institution, when he does not have a warrant from God, that is superstition! We must all be willing worshippers, not will-worshippers.

We must come freely to worship God, but we must not worship God according to our own wills. Therefore, whatever we do in the worship of God, if we do not have a warrant for it, when this is said, "Who required this at your hands?" it will stop our mouths another day (Isa. 29:13).

Longing for a Mystical Experience

Finally, within postmodern worship circles there is a demand for a return to "mysticism." This is surely nothing but another attempt to recreate by external means the kind of depth of spiritual life that can only be generated internally by the Holy Spirit. Andrew Louth, among others, calls for a departure from the failed ways of the present and a return to "guided meditative prayer, prayer walks, incense, candles, chanting and other historical Christian rituals." This is merely another shallow dive into the subject of worship. What produced these monkish habits and what did they yield? Were they undertaken under Scriptural warrant or will worship? And did they produce devotion or superstition? And where is postmodernism leading? What is generating it? Is it merely cultural changes, or is it spiritual depravation which can only be satisfied by obedience to the Word of God and dependence on the Spirit of God?