

Rock and Roll and My Soul

Worship and Postmodernity

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The historic Liturgy of the Mass includes the Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei. These five components unify the voice of the Church in prayer, adoration, confession, worship and affirmation of the True Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The Church, which experiences this unity of voice, is the Church Catholic: That is, the Church of all times and places, the Church Triumphant as well as the Church militant. Our voices are blended together by the Holy Spirit with those of Moses and Aaron, Peter and Paul, Chrysostom and Ambrose, the faithful departed and the Church throughout the world today. Added to the chorus are “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.”

The focus of the Liturgy is Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Its practice in Christian worship is to center the worshiper on Jesus Christ, removing any element of self that remains.

The Scriptures offer a magnificent picture of worship in Isaiah 6:

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet; and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.” And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven. Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”¹

Coming into the Lord's holy presence was an awesome, fearful thing for Isaiah. It confirmed his personal insignificance standing before His altar, witnessing the worship of heaven. This true worship was not about heartfelt needs; It was God who was lifted up and exalted, not Isaiah. For Isaiah, quite the contrary was true: “Woe is me, for I am ruined.”

Biblical worship brings the worshiper into the same presence of God that Isaiah experienced. The difference is that in Christ Jesus we can see God face to face. Jesus has taken away our “woe”. We *are* Jesus in God's eyes, for He traded places with us and became our sin. While this truth is the essence of the Christian faith, it does not mean that the focus of worship changes. God is both subject and object of our worship.

The historic liturgy of the Church, much of which can be traced back to the First Century², keeps the Church rightly focused on God. It does so from the vantage points of Law and Gospel and within the context of the full counsel of God.

The liturgy has been expressed in many ways over the centuries. Different musical settings and styles have always existed and continue to be created³. It is not the intent of this monologue to enter into the so called “worship wars” where traditional style is poised against

¹ Isaiah 6:1-8, *New American Standard Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

² See *The Didache*.

³ For instance, a new LCMS hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book*, will be released in 2007. It contains several new liturgical settings and hymns.

contemporary. It is not our intent to explore differences of style; it is the substance that we are concerned with. All liturgies were contemporary at one point.

What does matter is that the liturgy of the Mass is maintained. The truism, *Lex orandi lex credendi* stands: The way people pray (broadly translated *worship*) is the way they believe.

The content must be the same no matter what the style. And the style should be reverent as befitting the Word of God, with the text of the liturgy and the music used in agreement.

However, to remove the content of the Mass will cause the Church to lose its focus in worship. It will also break the unity of voice that the Church has been blessed with over the centuries.⁴

Author Steven J. Lawson in his book, *Famine in the Land: A Passionate Call for Expository Preaching* summarizes a shift that is becoming widespread within the Church:

As the Church advances into the twenty-first century, the stress to produce booming ministries has never been greater. Influenced by corporate mergers, towering skyscrapers, and expanding economies, bigger is perceived as better, and no where is the “Wall Street” mentality more evident than in the church. Sad to say, pressure to produce bottom-line results has led many ministries to sacrifice the centrality of biblical preaching on the altar of man-centered pragmatism.

A new way of “doing” church is emerging. In this radical paradigm shift, exposition is being replaced with entertainment, preaching with performances, doctrine with drama, and theology with theatrics. The pulpit, once the focal point of the church, is now being overshadowed by a variety of church-growth techniques, everything from trendy worship styles to glitzy presentations and vaudeville-like pageantries. In seeking to capture the upper hand in church growth a new wave of pastors is reinventing church and repackaging the gospel into a product to be sold to “consumers.”⁵

This shift is subtle yet damning. It is 180 degrees out of phase with Biblical worship. The subject and the object have now become “me”. The concern of many churches and pastors has shifted from Biblical faithfulness to filling the pews.

Some churches have been very “successful” in applying this new paradigm.

Known as both “meta-Churches” and “mega-Churches”, fellowships such as Willow Creek Community Church in the area of Chicago, Illinois boasts thousands of worshipers each week. Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas woos in the crowds with Joel Osteen’s Schuler-like positive preaching. The opening service of their new church in the refabricated Compaq Arena, had a record 57,000 people in attendance.⁶

There is tremendous pressure to duplicate this format of ministry. It is seen as both successful and desirable. The worship is entertainment, complete with highly technical lighting, Hollywood-like television screens with slick camera angles, moving stages and standing ovations. This is not to say that such events do not stir people to praise God. But it is to say that it is not true worship; for the element of “self” is prominently present.

Charles Swindoll, evangelical pastor, author and past president of Dallas Theological Seminary makes an important observation:

⁴ For an excellent, in depth treatment of this entire topic, see Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). ISBN 0-8028-4102-3.

⁵ Steven J. Lawson, *Famine in the Land: A Passionate Call for Expository Preaching*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2003). Pages 25, 26

⁶ www.Lakewood.cc . Home page.

A man who meant so much to me in my formative years... used to help me understand the difference between thanksgiving and true praise and worship. In thanksgiving I'm still in the picture and the arrow goes both ways. I'm thinking of the things I've been blessed with and I'm thanking my God. I'm remembering the number of good things that have come: The forgiveness, the relief, the friends, the memories and I'm thanking Him and expressing my gratitude. But in worship I'm out of the picture. Like David at the time when he hands the torch to Solomon... That's worship. It's all about God⁷

One plausible explanation for the draw to this new paradigm of Church is the influence of post-modern culture. Postmodernity is a title given to the sociological phenomenon that celebrates. One postmodernist takes a stab at defining postmodernism:

As a term Postmodernism is difficult to define as it covers a wide range of disciplines and general areas of thought. These include art, architecture, literature and technology. There are however a number of central characteristics that help us to understand the foundations of the postmodern.

Firstly, like modernism, postmodernism rejects all boundaries...

Secondly, there is a concentration on fragmentation and discontinuity as well as ambiguity. The postmodern focuses on a de-structured, de-centered humanity. What this really means is that the idea of disorder and fragmentation, which were previously seen as negative qualities, are seen as an acceptable representation of reality by postmodernists. Modernism considered the fragmented view of human life as bad or tragic, while postmodernists rather celebrate this seemingly meaningless view of the world. It is an acceptance of the chaos that encourages a play with meaning. Postmodernism also accepts the possibility of ambiguity. Things and events can have two different meanings at the same time. A more rigid rational and logocentric or linear approach tries to avoid or reduce ambiguity as much as possible. Postmodern thought sees simultaneous views not as contradictory but as an integral part of the complex patterning of reality.

Postmodernism is an attempt to question the world that we see around us and especially not to take other people's views as the final truth. Postmodernism puts everything into question and radically interrogates philosophies, strategies and world views. There is no such thing as a definition of the postmodern. It is a mood rather than a strict discipline. Postmodernism, with all its complexity and possible excesses, is an attempt to find new and more truthful versions of the world."⁸

As can be seen, postmodernism is a very complex system. Distilled one might say that postmodernism accepts no truth except what one believes for himself even if it is wrong, holds no standards, and rejects all concept of sin—except that of *intolerance*. There is no accountability except to self. At the center of postmodernism is its god: Me. I determine what truth is and is not; four times four is ten because I say so, and the goal is never to judge anyone, but celebrate diversity.

Marva J. Dawn in her landmark work, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, illustrates postmodern thought quite well:

A baseball joke makes clear the progression in history from the premodern belief in objective truth to postmodernity's deconstructionism. A premodern umpire once said, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I calls 'em as they is." Believing in an absolute truth that could be found, earlier societies looked for evidence to discover that truth. A modern umpire would say instead, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I calls 'em as I sees 'em." For the modernist, truth is found in one's own experience. Now a postmodern umpire would say, "there's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' till I calls 'em." No truth exists unless we create it.⁹

⁷ Charles Swindoll, *Taking a Stand... A Reformation in Christian Living: A Reformation in Our Worship*. Audio CD. (Plano Texas: Insight for Living, 2003). Track 3.

⁸ www.Esortment.com. Author not named in the article.

⁹ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*. Forward by Martin E. Marty. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995). Page 36.

The implications for the Church are staggering. There is no absolute, objective truth. There is no God but “me”. The Scriptures hold no authority. There is no such thing as sin. One creates his own destiny. Diversity is celebrated. Tolerance is demanded. One declares his own truth. Truth and reality do not necessarily have to be connected.

It axiomatically follows that worship which is “me” centered will be attractive to this generation.

Coupled with postmodern narcissism is the present day ignorance among churches and pastors of the function of the historic Liturgy of the Church. Many are willing to sacrifice the richness of the words and the eternal connection between God and the Church through the Liturgy because such things are seen to be archaic. “They don’t speak to us anymore.” So the Liturgy is abandoned. In its place are well choreographed songs thought to be more in line with contemporary culture’s liking. The depth of the theology found in hymns is replaced by mantra-like praise choruses that are catchy and have a beat.

According to many Church Growth experts, the primary evangelism of Churches takes place on Sunday mornings. This is when the “seekers” often come. Following post-modern thought, Churches don’t want to seem intolerant of these visitors nor scare them away with liturgy. So the level of worship is reduced to either entertainment on the one hand—enabling the visitor to “take it in”, or to tripe on the other, dumbing down worship to the lowest common denominator.

Worship has been turned into a marketing tool for the sake of evangelism:

Addressing Felt Needs

The necessary first question in evangelism is “What are these people seeking when they come?” This assesses the context for a church’s life and style, that is, the people who are being reached. What needs do they feel and what are they looking for? ...I cannot help but look at evangelism as a marketing task... Contrary to popular opinion, marketing is not just promotion and selling. It is foremost a matter of understanding what potential consumers want when they are shopping to fill their needs. God marketers rely heavily on market research...¹⁰

This is yet another paradigm shift that has occurred over time. For centuries *worship* and *evangelism* were two separate, distinct aspects of Christian life. The Liturgy was intended for the Faithful, not for evangelism.

Those who were brought to the Church or who came seeking were *catechized*. They were not allowed to stay for the Mass. It was only after Baptism and Confirmation that the “seeker” would be brought into the full Eucharistic fellowship with the Congregation. Part of that catechesis was learning the liturgy. The worship did not stoop to their elementary level; it exalted God, whether or not it was comprehended.

David Luecke continues:

God can save [traditional/ older churches] only when they are willing to lose their own unique life with its preserved memories and protected style... Translated for churches into a current popular term, we can say that churches should deny themselves and go the way of the cross—for the sake of success. Of course, that is success as God defines it, not as organizations measure it...¹¹

¹⁰ David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America’s Mission Challenge.* (St. Louis: CPH, 1988). Pages 69-70. Note the title of the section in his book, bolded and underlined above.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Page 32.

Here do we see that not only is the worship of the Church seen as a marketing strategy, but that those churches who follow the historic Liturgy are seen to be lost. God cannot work with a church if it doesn't strive to be successful or abandon its "protected style." Perhaps Luecke should inquire as to why that "style" has been protected since Pentecost. Once again, the issue is not style, as Luecke sees it, but substance. The rich treasure chest of the Church has been abandoned in favor of a Wal-Mart wind-up music box that plays something more familiar, something more popular. But the contents are nary the same.

Postmodern thought has invaded the Church of Jesus Christ. In doing so it not only has affected worship; it has affected doctrine and confession. Shifting the emphasis from worshipping God to "celebrating me" sounds incredibly close to violating the warning that Saint Paul gives:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.¹²

Accommodating this mindset is spiritually lethal. Worship is about God, not about the worshiper. The Church in large measure has lost this truth today.

Seeking the Scriptures, we see that the Church is called to be "counter-cultural", that is, culture is not to shape the Church; the Church is called to shape the culture. This is as true for worship as it is for doctrine.

Robert Wilken makes the following observation:

It is less urgent to convince the alternative culture in which we live of the truth of Christ than it is for the church to tell itself its own story and to nurture its own life.¹³

If the Church is to be faithful to the call of *The Voice of One Calling In the Wilderness*, "He must increase, I must decrease" She needs to evaluate present worship practice and return to the common roots of Her history: the Historic Liturgy. She cannot tell her story to the world when She doesn't possess it Herself.

Dr. Eugene H. Peterson, professor Emeritus of Regent University observes:

The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in small towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God. It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades.¹⁴

Peterson is right on the mark. The Lord has not called His Church to be successful; He has called Her to be faithful. Faithful in doctrine; faithful in worship; faithful in fellowship; faithful to Him.

So what is the Church to do?

¹² 2 Timothy 4:3-5, NASB.

¹³ As quoted by Ken Meyers, *The Mars Hill Audio Journal*. Volume 75.

¹⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987). Pages 1,2

First She must understand what worship is and what it is not. Worship always must have God as its subject and object. That many are not willing to consider this axiom today is telling. Those who continue to allow culture to direct them rather than the Word of God are disaster bound.

Second, She must understand that worship is not simply a “here and now” experience; that it is a continuation of the voice of the Church of the past; it is a cojoining of the praise of God with angels and archangels and all of the company of heaven.

Third, She must understand that worship and evangelism are distinct and find ways to emphasize both in their own settings. While visitors will still come to worship we dare not dumb the worship of God down to their level.

Fourth, She must understand that the concept of abandoning the liturgy is false. Liturgy provides the structure and the words and ensures that the full counsel of God is presented each week.

Fifth, She must resist the temptation of some that the Liturgy is an end in itself. It is a vehicle that the Church has used to worship God and crucify self. It is not meant to draw attention to itself. When it becomes its own end it becomes idolatry. Dead orthodoxy is as spiritually lethal as all of its postmodern counterparts.

Sixth, the Church must remember that she is “in the world but not of the world.”

True worship is all about God. When He is the center and the object of praise; when the corporate worship of the Body of Christ joins her voice with angels and archangels and all of the company of heaven in the Liturgy, whether organ or guitar is used is not critical. Worshiping in a fresh way and accommodating the culture are two different issues. The intent of this paper is to address the latter.

As Eugene Peterson has rightly concluded: “It is the task of the Christian community to give witness and guidance in the living of life in a culture that is relentless in reducing, constricting and enervating this life.”¹⁵

When the Church comes understands the fullness of this thought She will continue to make a difference in the world, postmodernism notwithstanding.

¹⁵ Eugene H. Peterson as quoted by Ken Meyers, *The Mars Hill Audio Journal*. Volume 75

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