

APPENDIX 1-D

LECTURE NUMBER FOUR: WORSHIP AND POSTMODERNITY

Lecture Number Four Outline

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I. Notes

Though less extensive than the previous lecture, a “PowerPoint” presentation accompanies this lecture as well. It is, like the one associated with the second lecture, more word-oriented and serves to underscore some of the more important points (e.g. the section on “EPIC” worship).

II. Lecture Goal

The goal of the lecture is to help students see how modernity and postmodernity impacts the way we worship. A sub goal is to gain a biblical perspective on worship and its proper definition.

II.A. Objective

We will first look at the biblical definition of worship, then compare how modernity either supports or does not support worship. Finally, we will examine ways postmodernity can support the biblical definition of worship.

III. Opening Prayer

“Great and merciful God, with our whole lives we praise you, recognizing that our every waking moment should be a glorification of you. Our weekday worship of you is the best we can do by ourselves, but it’s not enough, for our hearts yearn to be with the Body and lift up hymns of praise with others. Our hearts yearn to be with the Body so that we can hear from you with others. Our hearts yearn to be with the Body so that we can better understand our world with the help of others. May the only measure of success of our Sunday worship be whether or not you are pleased with what you hear and see. Help us learn how to worship you better and how to lead your people to a higher, deeper, more biblical worship that will change their lives and, ultimately, the world around us. It’s a world that is odd and seems so strange, yet it is a world that you love so much. For we make our prayer in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

IV. Introduction

We have painted in the last two lectures the modern and postmodern worlds, at least in broad strokes. In this lecture, I want not only to look at how each impacts the way we worship but, more particularly, examine how our worship can impact the culture around us.

Before we do so, however, we need to do some thinking about what worship is (and what it is not) from a biblical perspective so that we can try to identify the places where cultural influences have hit the mark and, conversely, where they have failed. I maintain that we must restore a proper theology of worship and want to suggest that worship theology, like so many other elements of classic Christianity, has gathered layers of historical accretion over the centuries. Like a precious artifact retrieved from an archeological dig site, it must be cleaned and restored down to its original finish before contemporary eyes can see the original intention.

V. Worship: The Biblical Perspective

Our whole purpose for being is to worship God. Our whole person should worship God. In the modern era, we learned quite well how to worship God with our minds, mainly through the spoken word. In fact, we worshiped him so well with our minds that we disassociated most every other of our senses from worship, much less had time to contemplate metaphysical subjects such as our reason for being. We were born to worship God.

A.W. Tozer beautifully spells out the theology of this truth with a story:

One of the greatest tragedies that we find, even in this most enlightened of all ages, is the utter failure of millions of men and women ever to discover why they were born.

Deny it if you will – and some persons will – but wherever there are humans in the world, there are people who are suffering from a hopeless and depressing kind of amnesia. It forces them to cry out, either silently within themselves or often with audible frustration, ‘I don’t even know why I was born!’

...Our first parents in the human race [were] the man named Adam and woman named Eve. Adam had a great fall and he received a terrible bump; involved with him in the catastrophe was Eve, his wife. Then, when they tried to shake the fog out of their minds, looking at each other, they realized that they no longer knew who they were, and they did not know why they were alive. They did not know the purpose for their existence.

Ever since that time, men and women alienated from God and trying to exist on a sick, fallen planet have been pleading, ‘I don’t even know why I was born.’

Those who have followed the revelation provided by the Creator God have accepted that God never does anything without purpose. We do believe, therefore, that God had a noble purpose in mind when He created us. We believe that it was distinctly the will of God that men and women created in His image would desire fellowship with Him above all else. In His plan, it was to be a perfect fellowship based on adoring worship of the Creator and Sustainer of all things.¹

If we were born to worship and if the modern era has contributed to building a worship theology that leaves out most anything other than the mind and the spoken word, then one of our principal challenges is to create a new kind of worship that helps people rediscover why they were born and how they can engage the whole self in worship.

Who is worship for? What is worship for? If worship is for the congregation, then what we sing and how we sing it become issues of popular taste. If worship is a tool to get people to come to church, then what we sing and how we sing it become consumer products. But if worship is for God and about God, and if it also has to do with our obedience, as well as growth in Christian character and discipleship, then that changes most everything. For some, “worship” and “musical style” have become synonymous terms. When we confuse the two, or combine them, we can make bad assumptions about their “power” or effectiveness to achieve certain results. Musical style does not win people to Christ, personal relationships do. Musical style does not connect people to God, the Holy Spirit acting through the ministries of worship does. Musical style does not grow our Christian character and discipleship, the word does. I think we can get into all kinds of trouble if we convince ourselves that worship is a tool for some kind of goal,

¹A.W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship? A Call to True Worship* (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1985), 49,51.

no matter how noble. Our biblical mandate as a church is for worship to be our purpose. Worship must not be a tool for anything.

So here is another challenge: For some in my tradition, the point of the service is whether or not any public decisions are made. Worship, then, becomes a means to that end. Worship, for others, *is* the sermon. Have you ever heard a preacher say, just before starting the message, “I don’t know about you, but I think we’ve already worshiped here this morning”? I once had a pastor tell me that he wanted the invitation hymn to “draw people in.” Is not that the Holy Spirit’s business? Listen carefully to this and mark it down: There is a big difference between reaching someone and getting a reaction out of them. Do we really believe that only a certain kind of music reaches a certain kind of person? I wonder sometimes if leaders think of worship planning as a kind of religious alchemy: if we add a dash of this or a splash of that, blend in a bit of something else, then we are sure to get the “perfect service” or the intended result.

The theology of worship has inherited some problems from the Enlightenment.

Evangelical issues involving worship seem to be rooted in the conflict between the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and the nineteenth-century romantic stress on emotion. The emphasis on reason during the Enlightenment resulted in a heady form of worship. Worship assumed the nature of a lecture hall, where the primary emphasis was given to the sermon. This intellectual worship was challenged by revivalism...[which] clashed with the older worship, which was directed more toward the mind. One evangelical group located the meaning of worship in the shaping of the Christian mind; the other evangelical stream pointed to the meaning of worship in the experience of the heart. This conflict of style has continued in the twentieth-century debate about traditional versus contemporary worship. Traditional worship seems to be hanging onto modernity while contemporary worship has capitulated to pop culture. In either case the debate continues to rage about style with little concern for a biblical theology of worship.²

² Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 99.

An accurate, biblical theology of worship has as its centerpiece the reenactment and recitation of God's saving acts and deeds throughout history and our relationship to him as a covenant people. The biblical basis for this truth is found, in part, in Deuteronomy 7:6 when God entered into a covenant relationship with Israel and they became "a people holy to the LORD, chosen to be his people." In the New Testament there is a new covenant, sealed by the blood of Christ, through which we the church enter into unique relationship with him and become "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (I Peter 2:9).

Covenant language is full of reminders of who God is and what he has done for his people. And covenant structure reminds us that we belong to God – we are representatives of his kingdom in this territory – and therefore have a kind of contractual obligation to serve and obey him and bring him appropriate tributes. Did you know that in the days of the Old Testament covenant, the greater king would set up territorial markers that were images of his own likeness? We, who are made in God's image, are the most visible sign of his sovereignty over the earth. Our obligation is to worship him, and worship will take on a new, deeper dimension when God's people in the pews understand this truth.

Another problem inherited from the Enlightenment is a loss of understanding of the order of worship. The earliest description of New Testament worship is found in the book of Acts where, according to Luke, the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Worship is necessarily Christocentric because the very order of worship is to be found in Christ. "One of the most immediate consequences of recapturing worship as a

telling and acting out of the Christian vision is the impact it makes on the order of worship. The rule of thumb is that this order, rooted in the living, dying, and rising of Christ, which it re-presents, is the vehicle through which the story of the word of Christ is proclaimed and enacted.”³

If you haven’t already, you will soon learn about the ancient “four-fold” pattern of worship. The Institute, which holds that the pattern is a basic, biblical model for all Christian worship, has even incorporated it into the school crest. Beyond the idea that our worship must be Christocentric, as we have already said, I believe that it must also be guided as closely as possible to the historic four-fold pattern of Entrance, Word, Table (or alternate thanksgiving), and Dismissal. You can find a number of biblical references that describe the four-fold pattern, but my favorite is found in the story of the two followers of Christ on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. Sometime soon, carefully read that passage and see if you can find the four basic elements of biblical worship.

A final theological problem that must be corrected is a loss of symbolic communication. The modern era was word and mind dominated and used conceptual language. Prevailing notions about universal, scientific truth and the discovery of it through observation, analysis, logic, and reason left us with a real dilemma in the church: it left us with a form of communication that has little room for paradox, mystery, symbol, or image.

This modern rejection of visual forms of communication resulted in the loss of the sacraments as ‘visual words.’ In evangelicalism the notion of a sacred presence through divine action is largely denied. In the desire to make Christianity as rational as possible and to steer clear of the rituals of the Catholic Church, we have denied the power of symbol to create and form the Christian community. For us truth resides in words, not images, symbols, and actions. Consequently, we have shifted baptism and

³ Ibid., 104.

Eucharist from God's action to human action. Baptism has become the means by which the converting person declares his or her faith [and I would add, joins the church]; Lord's Supper has been reduced to an intellectual recall of Jesus hanging on the tree. We have reduced the ritual of water and of bread and wine to understandable actions. The mystery is gone.⁴

By way of illustration, let's talk about paradox for a moment. It is extraordinarily difficult for most modern people to be at peace with a paradox. Perhaps the perfect example is the Trinity. The concept of the Trinity has been so difficult for the modern mind that it was largely ignored by many churches – a kind of irritating, unresolved notion best left alone. I can recall little or no reference to or instruction on the Trinity during my formative years in church. The Trinity makes no logical sense. It isn't rational. This is precisely why you have the rise of the Unitarian movement at the beginning of the 18th century, coinciding, please note, with the rise of the modern era. The modern way of communicating cannot come to terms with the Trinity; symbolic language, on the other hand, can at least make an attempt. I once heard the paradox of the Trinity explained in this fashion: Think of a note on the piano. It stands alone and has its own worth and wholeness when played singly. If you add another note, a third above, the first note does not cease to exist and is not made less a thing by the addition of the new note. Add another and you have a beautiful triad, a pleasing chord that makes just as much sense when played together as the single notes do when played alone. Each note has its own identity and worth and context apart from the other. Each has the same together. Each can occupy the same space at the same time. Modern thinking found it difficult to imagine and describe a God with three equally important parts occupying the

⁴ Ibid., 101.

same space. Symbolic communication can imagine and tries to describe the “hard teachings” of our faith.

At the very center of this language dilemma was (and still is) the stormy debate over what to “do” with the Bible. The modern way of thinking taught that an understanding of the written word leads to a relationship with Christ. One problem with this line of thinking is that most people’s encounter with God works the other way around: A relationship with Christ leads to an understanding of the Bible. The Southern Baptist Convention is at war over this very thing right now, and pushing the conservatives, who are in charge at the moment, is their “Book-oriented approach to the Christian faith,” as Robert Webber calls it. This approach, which as we have already noted, dominated during the Enlightenment and modern eras, makes several presuppositions:

1) The Bible is the mind of God written; 2) the mind is the highest faculty of our creation in the image of God; 3) truth is known as the human mind meets the mind of God in the study of Scripture...

Both conservatives and liberals have approached the Bible through [the modern method of] empirical methodology in search of truth. Liberals used reason to demythologize the Bible and reduced the essence of the faith to love. On the other hand, conservatives argued for the exact correctness of everything in the Bible, based on the doctrine of inerrancy. In this vicious circle the liberals tore the Bible to shreds with biblical criticism while the conservatives continually followed the liberals in trying to put the pieces back together with rational arguments. In the meantime for many the message was lost...

...The issue in a postmodern world is not to prove the Bible, but to restore the message of the Bible, a message which, when proclaimed by the power of the Spirit, takes up residence within those who know how to hear... The mystery of the person and work of Christ proclaimed is the starting point of faith, not rational argumentation that seeks to prove the Bible to be correct.⁵

VI. Worship and Postmodern Culture

This brings us around to looking more closely at worship in the postmodern culture.

⁵ Ibid., 46.

What in the world are we to do? I don't need to tell you that worship is all over the map these days. There is a kind of word-oriented brand of worship that seeks to edify the saints through, for lack of a better way of describing it, intellectual discourse. There is a revivalistic kind of worship that seeks to save the lost. There is the seeker service that tries to solve problems by separating worship from evangelism. There is a kind of charismatic and praise-oriented worship that seems to stress style, or say, emotion, over substance. Some worship seems to be holding onto modernity, some worship seems to have fallen to the influences of pop culture. What are we to do? Where do we go from here?

First, let's ask this question: Are there more choices available to us other than "traditional," "contemporary," or "blended"? Worship leaders these days are recognizing that mixing "traditional" and "contemporary" in some sort of functional way in order to satisfy two different groups of worshipers can leave both sides frustrated and even angry. And should we even be trying to satisfy worshipers anyway? I found out early in ministry that to a Baptist the term "traditional" can mean anything from "Eine Feste Burg" to some beloved revival song. And the term "contemporary" doesn't fare much better: Just ask Boomers and Millennials for their definitions. "Contemporary" to a Boomer might be one of the songs from the Jesus Movement or, perhaps, "Awesome God." Millennials, who seem to despise worship teams and the music of their parents (that should be no surprise to anyone), define "contemporary" as something from "Out of Eden" or "Anointed."

And what about blending? The term "blended worship," coined as I understand it by Robert Webber, was once a fashionable way to describe the mixing of traditional

elements, like hymns, with more contemporary ones, like choruses. The idea was that most of us weren't blending – that we were on one side of the musical fence or the other – and that doing so might help to end the raging worship wars. (By the way, I am convinced that most all worship is already blended; it's simply a matter of whether the worship service is on the “Grate” or “Grind” end of the blender spectrum, or way down at the other end at “Frappé” or “Liquify.” Not many churches, at least those in my denomination, were singing Mozart every Sunday. Besides, when I'm in the kitchen, blending things together usually ends up leaving a chunky mess).

I propose that we scrap the whole idea of blended worship. In fact, it's not even a term being used much these days by worship thinkers. The term now from Robert Webber—and I think it hits the nail on the head—is “convergent worship.” Convergent worship means bringing traditions together and creating something new. Convergent worship means going back to the basics, to the orthodoxy of the faith, and making it relevant to our postmodern world. Convergent worship is a de-modernized worship that seeks to reshape how we think about church and how we do worship along more classically biblical lines.

In the postmodern world evangelical worship is faced with the challenge and opportunity to bring the traditions of worship together in a creative way. From the ancient church, we derive the emphasis on the content and the fourfold order; from the Reformation, we obtain the emphasis on the Word; from free church history, we receive the Christocentric emphasis; and from the younger contemporary churches of our time, we inherit the sense of the Spirit and of intimacy. Worship renewal in the twenty-first century that draws from the Scriptures, and from the rich treasuries of history, will be concerned for contemporary relevance.⁶

Why should we look to the model of the early church over that of any other era?

⁶ Ibid., 99.

The Church, in the Western world, faces populations who are increasingly ‘secular’ – people with no Christian memory, who don’t know what we Christians are talking about. These populations are increasingly ‘urban’ – and out of touch with God’s ‘natural revelation.’ These populations are increasingly ‘postmodern’; they have graduated from Enlightenment ideology and are more peer driven, feeling driven, and ‘right-brained’ than their forebears. These populations are increasingly ‘neo-barbarian’; they lack ‘refinement’ or ‘class,’ and their lives are often out of control. These populations are increasingly receptive – exploring worldview options from Astrology to Zen – and are often looking ‘in all the wrong places’ to make sense of their lives and find their soul’s true home.

In the face of this changing Western culture, many Western Church leaders are in denial; they play and do church as though next year will be 1957. Furthermore, most of the Western Church leaders who are not in denial do not know how to engage the epidemic numbers of secular, postmodern, neo-barbarians outside (and inside) their churches....

Most Western Church leaders would never guess that ancient...Christianity could show the way today for two reasons. First, they assume that no expression of ancient Christianity could be relevant to the challenges we now face. Second, they assume that the only useful stream of insight is, by definition, confined to Roman Christianity and its Reformation offshoots.⁷

The Church Fathers arduously worked out the details of the faith – they “hammered out their theology,” as Webber puts it – in the context of polytheism, Gnosticism, cults, and mystery religions. Think about these truths: The Fathers summarized the general doctrines of the faith in creedal form. The early church had a significant role in the development of the canon of Scripture. The creeds, which are “models of theological thought and methodological inquiry,” gave definition to a trinitarian concept of God and to the dual nature of Christ. The ancient church provided foundational thought on ecclesiology, ministry, and the sacraments. The early church helped shape our ethical response to social concerns. And the early church “wrestled” with its worship at the same time it was crafting the creeds, canon, and ethics.⁸

⁷ George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 9-10.

⁸ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 28.

It is clear that the early church has defined the theological issues and established the framework or the ‘rules’ in which the church does its theological reflection. Anyone who defends the canon, subscribes to the Apostle’s Creed, advocates the Trinity, or adheres to the full humanity and divinity of Jesus is already affirming essential aspects of classical Christianity. Evangelicals already have a commitment to historic Christianity and only need to be reminded what that means. The work of the early church Fathers represents foundational Christian thought, which has been the subject of interpretation, reinterpretation, and debate throughout the history of the Christian church. The importance of the Fathers is crucial to every epoch of the faith. Therefore, no Christian dare wrestle with postmodern thought until she or he has studied classical Christian thought. To give special attention to the period of classical Christian thought is to be orthodox, evangelical, and ecumenical. Novel ideas of the faith will come and go, but the classical Christian tradition will endure.

Thus the primary reason to return to the Christian tradition is because it is truth that has the power to speak to a postmodern world. Early Christian teaching is simple, uncluttered, it cuts through the complexities of culturized Christianity and allows what is primary and essential to surface.

Furthermore, the classical tradition is sorely needed because so many people have come to the end of their patience with the modern version of evangelical faith and with current innovations that have no connection with the past...

Retelling the Christian tradition also accents what is common in the faith. It refuses to condone divisiveness between churches based on differences in secondary theological issues. What is truly important are those truths the universal church holds in common.⁹

VII. “EPIC” Worship

So, what are some specific ways we can both return to the ancient ways and engage our postmodern culture? Postmodern worship guru Leonard Sweet suggests that we adopt what he called the “EPIC” model – an “EPIC church for epic times – with EPIC standing for Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven, and Connected. Sweet sees postmodern culture as being EPIC, and one of his recommendations is that the church be EPIC as well.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 30.

Experiential

“It is one thing to talk about God,” Sweet says. “It is quite another thing to experience God.”

A modernist dies and finds himself surrounded by dense, billowy clouds that only allow him to see a short distance ahead. He sees that he is walking down a road paved in gold. Ahead, there is a slight break in the clouds. He sees a signpost and a fork in the road. The signpost has inscriptions with golden arrows pointing to the left and right.

The modernist reads them. The right arrow says, ‘This way to heaven.’ The left arrow says, ‘This was to a discussion about heaven.’

The modernist took the fork to the discussion.

Guess which fork the postmodernist took?¹¹

The postmodern world is open to experience. In fact, the postmodern world is looking for experiences. From shopping “experiences” that have more to do with the shopping and less to do with the products, from tattoos to entertainment, from tourism to dining out, postmoderns want to experience “experience.”

Postmoderns also want spiritual experience, but fewer of them are turning to the church to find it. There is a spiritual awakening of sorts in our nation, but it is being talked about and experienced outside the Christian church because most of our churches are uncomfortable with spiritual experience.¹² The magazine *American Demographics* saw the quest for “experiential faith” and the rediscovery of the soul so pervasive (“one of our nation’s most important cultural trends”) that it did a cover story on the phenomenon. We are spending two billion dollars a year on self-help resources alone and when the “self help” and “spirituality” categories are combined, the numbers are

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Ibid., 39.

staggering.¹³ Many secular corporations are co-opting the church’s experiential, spiritual language. Is it because we don’t use it much anymore? The “No Fear” logo is an obvious rip off of biblical language. Volvo wants to “save your soul.” Lotus and Caldwell Banker introduced in 1999 the same marketing slogan, “I am, I am.” Allianz reminds consumers, “Wherever you go, I will be with you.” There is an after bath powder called “Rebirth” (it claims to “renew the spirit and recharge the soul”). There is a nail polish called “Spiritual.” Most every company has a “mission statement” and some even have staff “evangelists.” Guy Kawasaki, the former “marketing evangelist” for Apple Computers wrote “Rules for Revolutionaries” in 1998 in which he helps entrepreneurs build a “sales ministry” that listens to customers.¹⁴

So, should we worship leaders adopt the tactics of the consumer world when it comes to making worship more experiential? No. In fact, it would seem that the consumer world is adopting our tactics. Ancient-future faith, a faith built on classic Christianity, is very experiential.

What is more experiential than the Table of the Lord? When we gather at the Table, we do more than merely recall Christ’s work on the cross. When we gather at the Table we re-member the Body of Christ. For the ancient Jew, as well as the early church, the notion of remembering was a far more potent affair than mere recollection. For them, remembering meant bringing something from the past in the present with such force that the event lost none of its original power. There is something remarkable about gathering at the Table because the Holy Spirit really seems to “show up”, as Robert Webber says it,

¹³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., 42.

in a particularly intense and present way. Re-membering the Body means reuniting the Head, that is, Jesus Christ, with the rest of the Body, that is, the gathered assembly. Can you imagine how powerful that would have been to the early Christians? How they must have longed to see Jesus again; and how they must have longed to gather at the Table to be reunited with him again!

How ironically sad if we were to neglect the Lord's Table, or say the meaningful use of Scripture, and significant prayer – the experiential things that most connect us to God in worship and define us as worshipers – in order to focus on attracting people to worship.

Participatory

“In the postmodern world,” Leonard Sweet say, “people take cues not from ‘above’ them but from others ‘around’ them. There are no more bosses, only clients. In this radical democracy, vertical authorities like priests and professors have been replaced by peers throughout the world who share common interests.”¹⁵ So much about the postmodern world is participatory. From the “People’s Choice” awards to karaoke clubs, from the talk radio phenomenon to the New York sidewalk sets of “Good Morning America” and the “Today” show, postmodern society is a choice-oriented and participatory society.

So, should worship leaders adopt the ways of the society when it comes to making worship more participatory? No. Ancient-future faith, a faith built on classic Christianity, is very participatory. This should be the model.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

“The Body of Christ is a participative community. Not just in the Eucharist is everyone a ‘participant,’ a part of the action, not apart from it. There are no more ‘professional clergy’ and pew-sitting laity. There are only ministers who look to leaders to mobilize and release ministry through them. All ‘participants’ are full partners.”¹⁶ Robert Nash calls this “trickle up” leadership.¹⁷

In the ancient-future church, worship isn’t done “for” the people, but rather “with” and “by” the people. Worship must feature elements that meaningfully involve the whole self and the whole congregation. The early church understood this and developed means by which the whole Body could participate, through Scripture, testimony, prophesy, responses in the liturgy, discussion, and, of course, the sacraments.

What is the attractive power and mystery of Eastern Orthodox and neotraditional worship to postmoderns? It’s the same as the attractive power and mystery of Pentecostalism – the fastest growing religious movement in the world. Postmoderns want interactive, immersive, ‘in your face’ participation in the mysteries of God...

Sometimes the Pentecostals and neotraditionalists haven’t only won; they’ve become one. For example, there is a fifteen-hundred seat Pentecostal church in Valdosta, Georgia, which converted en masse to the Book of Common Prayer, with a bishop of the Episcopal Church carrying out the confirmation of the entire congregation on Good Friday, 1990. A whole charismatic movement in California joined the Orthodox Church, calling itself the Antiochian Orthodox Church.¹⁸

Image-driven

While the modern world was word-based, postmodern culture is image-driven. Modern theologians tried to create a mind-centered faith where mystery and experience were set aside as being too illogical (remember the meal we described in the last

¹⁶ Ibid., 72.

¹⁷ Robert Nash, Jr., *An 8-Track Church in a CD World: The Modern Church in the Postmodern World* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1997). 104.

¹⁸ Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 72.

lecture?). But story and metaphor and symbol are at the very heart of who we are as Christians.

You might suspect that in a discussion about “image” we’d talk about the use of the media screen in worship, but that’s not the image I’m talking about here. There are some very good reasons to use screens in worship; there are also some very good reasons not to use them. For a great discussion on this very topic, see Marva Dawn’s “A Royal Waste of Time.”

What we must focus on here, rather, is the subject of symbol, which is closely connected to story and metaphor.

Though Baptists have historically shied away from symbols in worship, I am blessed to serve in a church where the sanctuary is rich with symbols. Each stained glass window features a scene from the life of Christ, along with a historic cross, the baptistery has a prominent place in the overall architecture, the Lord’s Table is covered with a season-appropriate parament and is topped with a sturdy cross. Good, solid symbols all.

But I think perhaps the most significant symbol – and it is certainly the most visible one – is the gathered assembly. We believe that the people of the church *are* the church and not, say, the programs or the building. God calls us to worship by name through the power of the Holy Spirit. We belong to God; we are his own. When we come together for worship, the greatest, single symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the group. Together, we are the Body of Christ.

To me, this is another challenging idea, for we are already too easily lured into thinking that worship is mostly about us. I am tempted to assume that any worship service is a sacred assembly, but I am also inclined to think that not all worship services

have God as their object. He might very well be the subject, but then that isn't at all the same thing. Take a close look at pronouns in our hymns and songs. So many – even those ostensibly about God – have quite a bit too much “I” and “me” in them.

So, should we worship leaders bend to postmodernism's obsession with symbol over substance when it comes to making worship more image-driven? No. Ancient-future faith, a faith built on classic Christianity, is very image-driven. Let's look again to the early church for our model.

Some of the most powerful aspects of our faith are images or have strong images associated with them: Creation. The flood. The nativity. The cross. The empty tomb. The return of Christ. A new heaven and a new earth.

In the postmodern world, worship must restore the images and message of the Bible to their rightful place, a place where they may be considered, celebrated, and given the opportunity to shape and form us.

Connected

The modern world's pursuit of individualism has, ironically, left us with a hunger for connectedness.

Postmoderns have had it with religion. They're sick and tired of religion. They're convinced the world needs less of religion, not more. They want no part of obedience to sets of propositions and rules required by some 'officialdom' somewhere. Postmoderns want participation in a deeply personal but at the same time communal experience of the divine and the transformation of life that issues from that identification with God. George Gallup, in his 1988 study of *The Unchurched American*, recommended as his number-one advice that the church stress religious experience over the institutional model of church by helping people experience God in their everyday lives.

Why was Times Square the most popular place to greet the new millennium?

Why are coffee bars the new dating places?

Why is the Internet becoming less a disseminator of information and more a social medium?

Why are more and more people logging on, not to gain information but to hear, ‘You’ve got mail,’ and even to find love on-line?

Why is the first thing a teen does after getting home from school is check E-mail and log on with friends?¹⁹

The answer is connectedness.

Should we worship leaders be on the lookout for ways to make worship more connected just because that’s what society seems to want? No. Ancient-future faith, a faith built on classic Christianity, is very connected. This should be our model.

Have you heard the Ken Medema song – it dates from several years ago – that features the line, “Don’t tell me I’ve got a friend in Jesus without showing me first I’ve got a friend in you”? People in the postmodern world want to find a place of meaningful community and connectedness. The early church knew all about connectedness.

Even a quick read of the first part of the Book of Acts shows how connected the believers in the early church really were. They ate together, they worshiped together, they held things in common. They cared for one another – looked out for one another – as if their very lives depended upon it. And in some cases, they did depend upon it. I wonder if we aren’t so different. We must care about the issue of connectedness if we are experience meaningful worship renewal in our churches.

VIII. Concluding Story

Let me end by telling you about a story about our church’s youth group.

Conventional wisdom says that if you want youth in your church, you need to “unplug that pipe organ and get you some drums and some keyboards.” (That exact quote, by the way, was uttered by a guest preacher at a Tennessee State Evangelism Conference I

¹⁹ Ibid., 113.

attended a few years ago). I was invited by our youth ministry team to lead worship in a discipleship week. In years past, the youth had traditionally done a mission trip, but the new leadership felt a need to lead our kids on a “Back to the Basics” retreat where personal growth and discipleship were the focus. When the “Back to the Basics” theme was given to me for planning, I saw an opportunity to try out this ancient-future theory about youth and worship music.

I started our week together by giving one another permission to use our bodies, posture, etc., in worship, and by talking about the importance of sign and symbol in worship. The music I used was truly contemporary, as well as simple. Many of the songs were from the contemporary worship movement in England, particularly from the live events at Stoneleigh, and most featured fairly simple accompaniment. The key for me in choosing it was the powerful, straightforward texts (some of them old hymns and Psalm paraphrases), many of which I thought would be too deep for our kids. I was completely wrong to worry about that.

Each of our morning worship sessions was loosely designed after a traditional morning prayer service. I used some pre-service time to explain how we would do the corporate prayers, when we would kneel, etc., and we used students to read the Scripture lessons (and this made a big impact upon the group).

There were two especially powerful experiences that week. We conducted a simple, candlelit communion and healing service. I started the evening by talking about communion in the early church and the simple beauty of a healing service. Our youth were mostly accustomed to the Lord’s Supper from primarily a memorialist point of view, and the idea of a healing service conjured up images of TV evangelists. The

impact this simple service had on our students was profound. After a joyful yet moving communion, many of them, with tears, came to us for anointing and prayer for healing.

Then, on another evening, and most moving of all, I led the kids in what I called a “veneration of the cross” service. I began by talking about Christ’s suffering and death, the work he accomplished on the cross, and both the discipline and freedom the cross represents. And then, quietly, I started some music appropriate to the context and invited the kids to consider the rough-hewn cross we had made earlier that afternoon. What happened next stunned all of us and even changed some lives. At first, no one moved. Then, one girl approached the cross and knelt. She lifted up her hands in supplication and began to weep. Slowly, more came. Some knelt, some prostrated themselves on the floor, others simply stood. One young man came and kissed the cross, then left a favorite necklace draped over one of the arms. By the end, we were all in tears. Even when the music stopped – when it was time to go – we lingered, embraced, sang. And we worshiped.

What we experienced that week was powerful. It was more than blended, more than ancient, and more than contemporary: It was convergent. And it was simple. Here was a group of traditional Southern Baptists worshiping with the lifting of hands, bending of knees, using responses from the ancient church, and sitting in stillness and quiet contemplation! We were not trying to attract kids or get someone to make a public decision or even try to grow our numbers. We were trying to worship.

IX. Small Group Activities/Questions

Group 1: Take this question, reflect upon it, and be prepared to share with the class:
How can we intentionally work toward designing worship to be more experiential? Has your church neglected the Table? Why?

Group 2: How can we work to make worship more participatory? Is worship at your church done “for” the people? How does our church architecture support or make more difficult participation by the people?

Group 3: How can we intentionally work toward designing worship to be more image-driven? Can churches that use screens all the time still not be image-driven?

Group 4: How can we work to make worship more connected? Do you think people really want to be connected? Most of us have modern and postmodern people in our churches. Is there a way to minister to both groups in this area of connectedness?