

Worship for postmodern times

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[Jesus prayed:] 'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in the truth.' (John 17:17-19)

Frequently on airplanes I meet persons who claim to be very absorbed in 'spirituality' but have no interest in institutional churches and their worship services. 'Churches don't meet my needs', they exclaim and consider the subject ended. Friendly conversation, however, often reveals that they have hidden their genuine needs even from themselves. I think particularly of a gold-bedecked professional gambler sadly departing from a visit with his son in the Midwest, of a fidgety lawyer trying to beat the plane to Anchorage, of a discourteous twenty-something 'needing' fiercely to be entertained, of myself in my own frustrations over various conflicts concerning worship.

How does the church minister to people in postmodern times? When postmodernists think that any meta-narrative¹ is a bid for power, what difference does it make that we Christians believe God's account from creation to culmination is a meta-narrative of grace? How will it affect our thinking about worship services in the third millennium that we believe that the Triune God is the truth? In this article we will paint broad brush strokes to consider the implications of Australian culture's postmodern condition for the church's worship.

¹ A meta-narrative is a universal, overarching story of truth that is true for all people in all places.

A specific example

Let us look at one particular case in order to frame the questions we should be asking. A few weeks before Easter one year a Canadian Broadcasting producer in Montreal telephoned me. A few pastors had told her about my book, *Reaching out without dumbing down*, and she questioned the main points of my approach, since she was preparing an Easter afternoon program focusing on what congregations could do to attract Canadians to worship. One generation ago two out of three Canadians participated in worship, but now the ratio is at most one out of three and even fewer in British Columbia and Quebec. As the producer and I conversed about such topics as idolatries that invade churches, wrong turns churches make, confusions about what worship is, and the kinds of questions we should be asking, she kept affirming my ideas. 'That is a good point', she would insist, or 'I see why you say that' or 'that makes a lot of sense'. Consequently, I was utterly astonished when she abruptly inquired, 'and what would you tell churches to do about people like me? I never go to church'. She compared herself to the typical middle-aged, disinterested defector from worship and asked how churches should attract her. How would you have responded?

The key question this conversation raised is *not* what worship should be to draw such people. The real issue is, in a culture which is increasingly non-Christian, post-Christian, or even anti-Christian, what does it mean to be church for the sake of the world when we worship and during the rest of the week?

The answer some give

Many church leaders these days would simply frame their response to this Canadian producer in terms of the question of appeal. For example, consider these remarks from David Luecke's review of my book, *Reaching out without dumbing down*, in a recent edition of the journal *Worship Innovations*. Luecke is referring to my endorsement of Kenneth A Myer's distinction between gourmet food, traditional home cooking and fast food, as examples of high, folk or pop culture.² Luecke writes,

The assumption is that most people would prefer gourmet food if they could get it. That's questionable. It can be hard to digest and the cost in time or money is usually too high ... Home cooking in general seems to be disappearing. That leaves Burger King. The whole worship discussion could be reframed around two alternatives: If you and your congregation had to choose between being a fancy French restaurant or a Burger King, which would you prefer? Most advocates of contemporary worship, including me, would opt for Burger King; in a given week it feeds a lot more people, and the food meets the needs. Which kind of food service do you think Jesus and Paul would choose?

² On pages 183–88 of *Reaching out without dumbing down: a theology of worship for the turn-of-the-century culture* (Eerdmans, 1995), I comment favourably on the three-fold distinction that Myers makes, in his *All God's children and blue suede shoes: Christians and popular culture* (Westchester, Illinois, Crossway Books, 1989).

First, we must note that Luecke's term, *contemporary worship*, is usually poorly defined in the various controversies over the subject. In addition, Luecke's comments and questions force us to raise several sets of deeper ones because his inquiries emphasise choice and preferences. Should these be our guidelines? Instead, the scriptures convince me that, in responding to the Canadian broadcaster's challenge, the principle question must be, 'What should the church BE?'

Luecke's review and similar arguments raised in worship discussions do not consider the essential, foundational biblical perspectives on the issues of who we are as God's people in community, what it means to gather together for worship to immerse ourselves in God's splendour to learn how to be church and, consequently, how we reach out to the world. Therefore let us focus on the unbiblical notions illustrated by Luecke's review and ask the following questions of the responses typified in his words.

Questions we should ask

1. Isn't the gospel sometimes hard to digest? Luecke complains that worship should not be like gourmet food which 'can be hard to digest'—but if it is always easy are we giving its participants the true God? The Triune God is mysterious, infinitely beyond our imagining, eternally wiser than we—a LORD who says, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways' (Isa 55:8). Christ repeatedly says, 'Woe to you!' (eg Luke 6:24–26). That can be very difficult to stomach.
2. Doesn't discipleship cost a lot? Luecke wants to avoid gourmet worship because 'the cost in time and money is usually too high'—but don't we have a Christ who told a rich man to sell all he had, who warned those who wanted to turn back home that they weren't fit for the kingdom? (see Luke 18:18–27 and 9:57–62). If our worship is not costly, how will we teach what discipleship means? The medium must match the message.
3. Which kind of food service did Jesus choose? Since He participated faithfully in worship at the Temple and the local synagogue, in Judaism's ritualised festivals and feasts, we could compare His choices both to home cooking and gourmet food. What kind of 'food service' does Paul signify when he urges us to 'seek the things which are above'? Which food will give us 'a foretaste of the feast to come'? How will our worship give its participants a vision of the heavenly kingdom? We need gourmet cooking to be immersed in God's splendour.
4. We have to ask why the home cooking of tradition in worship is disappearing. Is the heritage that could enfold us in the language of faith practised through the ages no longer important? Why have we lost the traditions that link us to people of faith throughout time and space? Many critiques of the postmodern world lament the control of advertising and an escalating world 'monoculture' which destroy social institutions and cultural folkways. Should churches be contributing to this cultural reduction, this destruction of musical 'home cooking'?

5. Which need, besides the need for speed, does Burger King food meet? If worship is like Burger King, how will we form the habits and practices, customs and manners of being God's people? For example, how will we teach profound meditation, awe-full silence, reflection on meaty doctrines, musical depth, memorisation of extensive texts, steadfast intimacy with the true God, the church's continuity, genuine community, earnest repentance, grieving lament, disciplined cross-bearing, timeless truth, the beauty of holiness, and faithful goodness? Will we learn those if our worship is like Burger King?
6. I don't advocate only one gourmet restaurant, but a plethora of them. I hope that worship could sometimes include Aboriginal as well as soul music, songs from South Africa and Russia, from the fourth century as well as the sixteenth, eighteenth, or twenty-first. Will we learn true diversity at Burger King?
7. No matter which food service worship resembles, we must ask whether it meets *genuine* needs—the needs of our lonely, decentred, hopeless, postmodern world. What is good for us and our neighbours? What will actually contribute to growth in faith? As we eat, are we growing stronger or just fatter?

Of course, the food analogy breaks down if we stretch it too far. But isn't it a serious theological problem to say that worship should be like Burger King because other food is hard to digest and costs too much in time and money? It seems to me that then we are talking merely about marketing and entertainment, instead of discussing worship, formation for discipleship, and liturgy (which means 'the work of the people').

These seven sets of questions and comments demonstrate thoroughly how wrong the direction is if churches merely ask how worship can appeal to people. Congregations and denominations are not declining for lack of attractive or 'contemporary' worship, but churches are failing for lack of theological questioning and training, of hospitality, and of displaying a way of life worthy of being pursued. I am not an elitist about worship style, for I emphasise the plurality of gifts in various styles. But I am adamant with respect to asking better questions about what it means to be a Christian and to be church together, about how people are formed by the narratives of the Bible to follow Christ, and about pursuing the way of discipleship, which costs us all of our time and money and sometimes is very hard to digest.

Wrong turns in the face of modernity and the postmodern condition

In the face of postmodern society's loss of meta-narrative and negation of meaning, its despair, emptiness and *ennui*, its deficit in moral consensus or commitment, its hopelessness and *anomie*, its rejection of authority and of any truth claims—all destructive effects generated by postmodernity—what is the church to be and do?

These are the societal illnesses for which congregations and their leaders must be concerned and not merely the downward trends in worship attendance in Australia. Responding *merely to the symptoms and not the illnesses*, some congregations have

taken drastic turns in recent years without adequate thinking about the theological, ecclesiological, and missional implications. Though the following list is far too cursory, it summarises some of the moves that should be questioned:

- In the face of the relativising of truth, some pastors and musicians are offering less truth instead of more, becoming therapeutic instead of theological. No wonder people are bored with 'church'—and the preachers are bored. Don't you find yourself much more interested if you have too much to say? If we recognise that Christianity always has too much to say—for God is always full of surprises—then we perceive the need for more content and not less, especially with the biblical illiteracy that characterises my land and yours.
- With society's proliferation of amusements and diversions, some worship leaders sacrifice content for entertainment and confuse worship with evangelism and evangelism with marketing. Instead, our worship forms should reflect our life in Christ, the way of Jesus. We can't draw people to the kingdom with entertainment, only to jolt them into the truth that the Christian life is the way of the cross. The process by which one is born from above should give a foretaste of faith's lifelong struggle for maturity, God's goal for the whole Christian community.
- As society increasingly becomes more openly pluralistic and less supportive of Christianity specifically, some congregations blur their unique identity as God's people, instead of accentuating it with loving commitment. To say it doesn't really matter if you are a Christian, as long as you are sincere, is to be ashamed of the gospel and the scandal of our particularity. Could I go to an airport, get on any plane, and hope that I wind up in Adelaide, Australia, as long as I'm sincere? Certainly it is true that in a pluralistic society Christians err if we are imperialistic about our particularity, and coercive instead of hospitable. But our faith is in a Triune God of good news, and the truth of God's grace accomplished and demonstrated in Christ remains unique and uniquely to be shared.
- As the culture becomes increasingly rootless, some denominations and individual parishes are giving up their heritage as communities with long histories and global connections. Many people in our society are struggling to find who they are and where they belong. A movie description provides an apt illustration. The summary said that a single mother, an architect, meets an every-other-weekend dad who is a journalist, and all they have in common is the same kind of mobile phone. How will they fall in love? Think of this story from their offsprings' perspective, and realise how pervasive in society such situations are. The children have been denied a completion to the storyline of their original two parents. Is a mobile phone enough to heal the rupture for them?
- Children in my husband's former fifth-grade classes with multiple parents demonstrate that nothing can ever totally heal the rupture. How can children without the security of completely faithful parents be able to trust who they are? In the face of such discontinuity and abandonment, to give up the roots of our faith that go all the way back to Sarah and Abraham, is a very harmful thing to do. We thereby

give up our ties to our forebears in the Jewish and Christian heritage, our history of God's interventions, our connections to the global community of believers.

- In the face of the culture's loss of moral authority, some churches become tolerant to the point of ceasing to be formed by scriptural narratives. Why should we allow society's relativising of morals to cause us to reject the clear instructions and moral patterns of the Triune God in the scriptures? In the name of a false compassion, genuine love is replaced with conformity to a culture detached from any ethical centre.
- In response to the increasing clamour for choice, some congregations foster consumerism according to 'felt needs' instead of embracing what is truly needful. Correlatively, churches are turned into a democracy in which doctrine and practice are decided by majority preferences. One result of the notion that Christ's body is characterised by choice is bitter battles over taste. Another result is that in our current therapeutic society, everyone thinks he or she 'needs' emotional coddling, whereas God has repeatedly taught us that Christians can *know* better. Especially in the face of suffering we learn that the will is stronger than our emotions and that faith can trust a God who might even be momentarily hidden. Ministering merely to felt needs and choices cheats worshipers of the truths and maturity they need to engage their wills over their emotions.

Hear clearly what I am saying

Please do not think, on the basis of the foregoing list, that I am advocating a wooden traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan's distinction is forever apt: *traditionalism* is the dead faith of the living, whereas *tradition* is the living faith of the dead. In the worship controversies between 'traditionalists' and 'contemporaryists' I am opposed to both polarities and want the *best* from both sides, since the church's treasure house is filled with both new and old. Since our congregations are linked to all God's people throughout space and time, we need both continuity with our heritage and constant reformation using faithful new forms and words and musical styles.

Also, I am not advocating biblicism or biblical idolatry. When I call for more truth and not less, I yearn for that truth to be presented without oppression or violence, with genuine care for the listeners, in vital forms, with the honest and humble recognition that we know truth only partially.

Most important, do not think I'm not interested in evangelism. I am, but I am also really worried about some misconceptions thriving these days. Evangelism arises out of intense concern for ministering to our neighbours in this postmodern world. In fact, let us return now to the Canadian producer who asked, 'What will you tell churches to do about me? I don't go to church'. 'First of all, I would like to be your friend', I replied, and she reacted with stunned silence. I told her that our conversation had revealed that we had much in common, that we could become great friends. 'We would have wonderful, probing conversations', I said. She immediately inquired, 'and would those conversations turn to the topic of faith in Christ?' 'Invariably', I acknowledged, 'because Jesus Christ is the centre of my life'. 'And', she then broke in, 'your life would show me that faith makes a difference?' 'Yes, I pray so', I responded. 'And then I would hope that you might want to come with me to worship the Triune God.'

What we need is the truth

What we need in worship is the truth—the whole truth, nothing less than the truth. Truth gives us good guidelines for the witness of our lives and in our worship services.

The truth that the church has to offer people caught in the postmodern condition must be shared in all its wholeness. To those who criticise Christianity because it has been—and sometimes now is—violent and oppressive, we respond by repentantly admitting that they are right. Beyond accepting the blame for Christians' failures in history, we recognise the whole truth that we remain corrupt and fallible. Scripture teaches us thoroughly that our nature is helplessly sinful, hopelessly lost. That truth forces us to acknowledge that we cannot know the truth entirely, that our eyes are blinded by sin, that our understanding of God is only partial. But that does not negate God's truth nor our recognition of Christ, who is himself the way, the truth and the life.

Against the postmodern rejection of meta-narrative, we Christians humbly suggest the non-oppressive, all-inclusive story of a Triune God who creates, redeems, and unifies as manifestations of perfect love and grace for the whole world. The Christian meta-narrative is the account of a promising God who always keeps His promises—a truth manifested in the Old Testament history of Israel and most clearly seen in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again in fulfillment of God's promises. We believe that this meta-narrative will reach its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus comes again to bring God's promised gracious reign to fruition—and thus the meta-narrative of God's kingdom already initiated gives us all that we most deeply need of hope, purpose, and fulfillment in this present life.

This God of eternal mystery condescends to reveal Himself to us—a process to which He invites us by drawing us to worship him. That is why our worship needs to be structured as richly and deeply as possible, so that we never lose sight of the fact that God is the one who enables us to come to worship and the infinite centre who thus receives our praise.

Furthermore, our worship must contain nothing but the truth. Music, songs, scripture lessons, sermons, liturgical forms, architecture, and other accoutrements of art and gesture and ambience are all means by which God invites, reveals, and forms us. Shallow—I did not say *simple*—worship materials will not reveal God's truth. Instead, they will both shape shallow theology and form us superficially. Songs with cheap or sentimental lyrics or banal music belie God's coherence and integrity. Sermons that draw attention to the preacher's eloquence or merely to the illusory needs of the listeners deprive the congregation of the formative power of scriptural narratives for meeting our genuine needs for repentant insight, constant forgiveness, authentic security, unconditional love, absolute healing, faithful presence, fruitful freedom, compelling motivation and coherent guidance for daily life, and eternal hope.

One worship service can never give us the whole truth, but worship must never give us untruth or less than truth. Our finite minds cannot begin to grasp all that there is to learn about God, but every time the community gathers, corporate worship contributes to our total store of truth. Only by God's grace and in the context of prayer and the whole Christian community can worship leaders prepare services that present as much truth as possible.

Against postmodernity's rejection of the past and of authority, in the church we realise that we are greatly helped in our planning by the wisdom gathered throughout the church's existence, by history's sorting of the good from the less-than-good in hymns and liturgies and interpretations. Now it is our responsibility to sort through what is new in order to choose what is true—keeping God as the subject/object of our worship, nurturing the truthful character of individual believers, and forming the Christian community to be outreaching with the truth that we know.

Equipping the saints for ministry

If worship stays well focused on God as its centre, participants will become better equipped to be God's witnesses to their worlds. To introduce our families and neighbours and co-workers to the Trinity and to God's gifts for them, we need an ever-growing understanding of His promises, His character, His interventions in the world, His truth that underlies our realities. Out of a character formed by the biblical narratives, by their faithful interpretation, and by resulting sound doctrine will flow love that responds to God's love. Such a character will manifest forgiveness that recognises the potency of the Father's grace, actions that follow the model of Jesus, encouragement and compassion empowered by the Paraclete.

Of course, strong Christian character cannot be formed if the worship hour is the only time the church has to nurture it, but worship's subtle influence on character dare not be misdirected. If we sing only narcissistic ditties, we will develop a faith that depends on feelings and that is inward-curved, instead of outward-turned.

Worship as truth and thereby formative of character must be a major issue for our churches because the immense needs of our world require persons nurtured by depth and faithfulness, rather than by what is flimsy, if not flippant. It is essential that worship carefully equip the saints with faith's truths so that they can witness to, and serve, their neighbours. The church needs both preachers and musicians with great faithfulness to give worship participants what they need instead of what they think they need, to offer that which is needful instead of catering to neediness. Ultimately—though probably not at first—this meat will be much more satisfying than the pabulum of a schmoozy emotionalism.

2 Timothy 3:14–17 invites us to be trained in the holy scriptures—to know them and be formed by them and not just 'believe' as if that were a leap in the dark, to have habits and not selfish preferences. We need that kind of training much more than our parents did, since the society no longer supports it and since so many cultural forces alien to the gospel impinge on our lives and urge our conformity. Yet many congregations these days present only 'adult forums' and sermons which merely 'share opinions' on various issues rather than offering deep explication of scripture to lay the basis for genuine Christian thinking, thorough teaching of the biblical narratives in order to form us to react as God's people with kingdom values to the problems and social concerns of our everyday lives. Why does so much of the new and old music used in many congregations lack theological depth, biblical images, motivation to be about God's purposes of witnessing, justice building, and peace making in the world? What kind of people are our worship services forming?

A vision

During His earthly life Jesus prayed for us—those who would believe through his disciples' witness—that we would be sanctified in the truth and then sent out into the world to bear testimony to it (John 17:17–21). That is a wonderful description of worship: that by the Father's gracious invitation, Christ's intercession and the Spirit's enabling, we are welcomed to learn of, and be in union with, the Trinity through the biblical narratives passed on by faithful witnesses. Gathered in the community of saints, we are formed by the truth taught in worship's music and word to be church so that out of our Christian character will flow the witness of our words and deeds for the sake of the world.

The postmodern world surrounding us yearns for stability, morality, security, fidelity, faith, hope and love. These deep needs can only be met through the one who is the truth. Let us make sure that the worship services we plan and guide present that truth in all its clarity and beauty and goodness.