

# **The Carnivalization of Church Christian Worship or Procliturgitainment?**

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Jesus' final words to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew have been the "business agenda" for Christians from that day forward: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20 NRSV).

I suggest the two most powerful cultural forces influencing our churches and the mission field we enter, postmodernism and the exultation of entertainment, have led many to engage in what I call "procliturgitainment."<sup>1</sup> This affliction is the result of pastors and worship leaders trying to appeal to that much-coveted "young families" demographic. "Procliturgitainment" is the result of such efforts – a blended mix of proclamation (of some sort), liturgy (while self-identifying as non-liturgical), and entertainment (which nearly all pastors would deny as an aspect of worship time in the congregations they lead and serve).

Congregationalists seem especially vulnerable the affects of these forces. We who are inheritors of the free church tradition celebrate our covenantal ecclesiology, but to truly enter into covenant with one another, we must have common definitions of the language and theology of those covenants. Postmodernism and our need to be entertained combine to deconstruct our covenant bonds with one another as individuals and as churches.

In presenting these ideas, I offer this caveat: the cultural issues I address here – especially postmodernism – deserve much more attention than this paper allows. I have tried to cover the broad themes of the topics at hand, but delving into the details could fill several volumes. I pray

the following is sufficiently informative to offer insight and succinct enough that we do not lose track of the ultimate purpose of this discussion: Exploring the ways elements of our culture negatively impact our Christian call to proclaim the Gospel. If there are gaps of information or seemingly unrealistic leaps of logic, they are due to my attempt to keep this paper concise and coherent.

### ***Communication, Technology, and Postmodern Thought***

The beginnings of this “carnivalization” of culture are difficult to pin down. Henry David Thoreau cites the invention, utilization and proliferation of the magnetic telegraph. “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate,” Thoreau wrote.<sup>2</sup> Whether the telegraph sparked our slide away from serious communal discourse or some other invention, like the printing press, deserves the credit, technological advances have made world-wide instant communication both commonplace and frivolous. Today computers affect most every household in America, whether they are visible (desktop or laptop computers) or hidden (in most every household appliance, thermostats, furnaces, televisions, radios, etc.). The computer chip, which is constantly evolving, has altered every aspect of our lives, including our ability to communicate and the language we use to do so. A “friend” no longer had to spend *any* time with someone in close physical proximity. People could literally never leave their homes and still “interact” with other people. With these changes, a new language developed, and access to information increased exponentially. However, users didn’t always think critically about the information they accessed. Until that time, the most trust-worthy sources of information were print-based sources. The technological explosion we now call the Internet allowed anyone anywhere to write anything, and anyone anywhere could read it. Suddenly the gathering of “facts” or “truth” became an

exercise in discernment. What information could really be trusted? Suddenly, people had instant access to information, but the reliability of that information was suspect.

Christians are not immune from the influence of these communication changes. Churches can now reach out to others through web sites, social networking sites, text messages and other electronic means, expanding the tools with which Christians can fulfill the Great Commission. However, Christians sacrifice the interpersonal exchanges that are so crucial to Christian community. It is legitimate to ask whether two or three people sitting at computers in different states and have never met face-to-face constitutes a “gathering” in which Jesus would dwell. Users of the technology often defended their use of words like “gathering” and “friend,” but in reality, the definitions of these terms were changing. Even the concept “communication” had to grow and develop to keep up with technology.

### ***Technology and Worship***

These new communication techniques not only changed the way Christians relate, but also the way in which they worship God. For instance, in October of 2009, the Houston Chronicle published a story on how one church offers a service in which parishioners can “tweet” (send a text-based communication from their cellular phone) their questions or reflections (140 characters or less please) to a team of church staffers during Pastor Kerry Shook’s sermon.<sup>3</sup> The staffers filter out any inappropriate messages, projecting the others on to a screen behind him and seen by those in the pews. After Shook concludes his sermon, he addresses selected questions or comments. Glenn Shuck, a professor in the religion department at Williams College in Massachusetts, believes that “tweeting” during church is more than just a trend, saying that it makes worship more participatory. “It’s a way to make members feel they’re part of the message,” Shook said. Even one local Rabbi thinks the idea is worth considering in Houston

synagogues.<sup>4</sup> Craig Hayes, pastor of Crossing Point Christian Church in Fresno, TX, disagrees. “If two people are talking, somebody’s not listening,” he said.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Postmodernism Briefly Defined***

Major changes in communication methods always affect the culture in which they occur. But the question deserves to be asked: Does “tweeting” truly make parishioners “part of the message?” In postmodern thinking, the answer is an unequivocal yes, because the message itself is devoid of meaning until the speaker and hearer agree on that meaning.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, the interaction between pastor and parishioners is *crucial*, because only in that interaction can linguistic meaning be found. Language – our chosen means of communication – is nothing more than a “play of linguistic signifiers” – symbols representing a larger concept or reality. Only in discourse can we define those signifiers.<sup>7</sup> Words are empty symbols; only together can we define the reality they represent.

Postmodern philosophy, in other words, erases all objective meaning of creation. All things are subjective and open to interpretation. While Enlightenment-era philosophers identified knowledge as rational and objective, postmodern philosophy says such rational, objective knowledge does not exist. One author summarized the postmodern mindset this way: “The world is not simply an objective given that is ‘out there,’ waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate and participatory.”<sup>8</sup> In the Enlightenment, philosophers embraced a scientific methodology for discovering “truth.” Any assertion of truth must be verifiable, ideally by a disinterested party. These verifiable “truths” then became common “truths”: The earth is round, not flat; viruses that once killed thousands of humans could be combated. These truths became part of our common story of history and human experience and, while they were not repeatedly recited, they served as one of many ways communities were formed and maintained.

These universally-accepted truths became humanity's "meta-narrative" – the underlying series of truths that compose knowledge.

Such understandings have now been rejected. Postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault asserts that those who claim to possess "Truth" are really asserting oppressive power over others.<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, Foucault and others reject anything resembling a meta-narrative, though not all agree with Foucault's assertions. But they agree that "truth" is fluid, not codified; and that humans in community must agree on the veracity of a "truth claim" before it can be considered "truth." Derrida even goes so far as to say that a person who reads a small paragraph of a book has more "truth" about that book than the author, because "truth" has changed since the book was written.<sup>10</sup>

This way of thinking is nothing new: the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who lived 500 years before Christ, claimed "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."<sup>11</sup> However, Heraclitus would likely be surprised by the postmodern notion that concepts like "river," "person," or "steps" can have multiple meanings, all of which may be "true."

The postmodern assault on communication methods deeply affects the way in which Christians understand their faith. On the one hand, postmodern thinkers leave more room for mystery than the Enlightenment did. However, when concepts and their signifiers are separated from one another, how do we talk about "salvation," "grace," or "unity"? How do we convey the Truth of the Gospel when the culture rejects any claims to universal truth? In some Congregational churches, members and pastors have adopted at least a portion of postmodern thought, which emerges as the mantra: "We can believe whatever we want." Others have changed the method in which the Gospel is delivered, following Marshall McLuhan's notion that

“the medium is the message.” Projectors became commonplace, allowing worship leaders to show contemplative visuals during prayer, or video clips to enhance a sermon and use more than “language” to proclaim the Gospel. Companies developed software programs to enhance the use of these tools. Such tools today are almost passé: As we saw earlier, some Christians use cellular technology, either during the service or after, in an effort to make proclamation more of a two-way process.

### ***Proclamation or Production?***

While advocates say these technologies allow them to reach out to those who need to encounter God in artistic and participatory ways, such devices can also be used – almost always unintentionally – as tools of entertainment, which replaces theologically-substantive proclamation and discourse rather than enhancing it. We might equate such an observation with Thoreau’s caution against the telegraph: Church leaders run the risk of using technology because the technology is available. It is fair to ask whether Houston Christians “tweet” because they are legitimately engaged in worship, or because they have the tools to “tweet?” How often does a powerful video clip become the impetus and inspiration behind a pastor’s reason for writing a sermon, with a scripture lesson chosen to fit the theme of the video?

Worship leaders must examine their motives for mimicking cultural trends in worship, to make sure the proverbial tail is not wagging the dog. The tool(s), methodology or technology must not replace the Triune God as our focus of worship or the inspiration behind our worship. The temptation to do so, however, is tremendous. Pastors and church leaders are obsessed with attendance and participation numbers, because pastors and church leaders are often evaluated based on the increase or decrease in attendance and membership. Knowing this, it is quite tempting to offer a simplified message – one that “leaves people feeling better about themselves

after the postlude than they did before the prelude”<sup>12</sup> – and use technology to augment that message, resulting in something closer to entertainment, under the auspices that such efforts would draw more visitors/members. Many churches did grow as a result, but what was the *real* reason for the increased attendance?

Social critics Neil Postman and James Twitchell say such growth was likely due to our constant quest for entertainment, which not only hampers the ability of the church to be the church, but it has actually crippled the ability and desire of Christians to seek substance in their conversations with one another, and to engage in the discipline and sacrifice it takes to grow closer to God.<sup>13</sup> Postman blames television. Twitchell blames America’s consumerism. The two go hand-in-hand: Television networks make money from advertisers, who pay more money to advertise on networks that draw more viewers. To draw more viewers, networks try and produce the most entertaining content possible. Entertained viewers are reliable consumers.

Postman, writing in 1985, suggests that while the world waited and worried about George Orwell’s “Big Brother,” Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* began to blossom. Huxley wrote of a world in which a portion of the population lulls the remaining population through genetic manipulation, subliminal messages, the endorsement of promiscuity, a pleasure-producing and mass-distributed drug, and the consumption of mass-produced goods.

America’s euphoric agent is entertainment, and television in particular, which has irreversibly changed the way we think and act, Postman argues.<sup>14</sup> We are “amusing ourselves to death” through the increasing reliance on technology to take away our aches and pains, to display our status in life, and to worship God.<sup>15</sup> In the process, the television industry has gradually blurred the lines between serious discourse and entertainment. Even televised newscasts are not immune. Postman writes:

Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. ... That is why even on news shows which provide us daily fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged to 'join them tomorrow.' ... We accept the newscasters' invitation because we know that the 'news' is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun, so to say. Everything about a news show tells us this – the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show, the vivid film footage, the attractive commercials – all these and more suggest that what we have just seen is no cause for weeping. A news show, to put it plainly, is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis.<sup>16</sup>

This preoccupation with entertainment, of course, is nothing new. Paul exhorted the Corinthian church to focus on the content of a person's teaching, rather than on the eloquent presentation of that content (1 Cor. 2:1ff). "I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor.2:3-5 NRSV). Content is secondary to the method of delivery in human communication. Paul would turn McLuhan's proclamation on its head: The message – and the message alone – is the medium.

One of the ways we satisfy our entertainment addiction is by shopping. Twitchell argues that we consume goods and services (and, Postman would argue, televised programming) because consumption has actually replaced religion in America. "Whereas the Heavenly Host organized the world of our ancestors, the Marketplace of Objects does it for us. They both promise redemption: one through faith, the other through purchase."<sup>17</sup> Christian's believe our imperfections are made perfect in Christ, but (at least in Reformed theology) that process is finalized in heaven. Consumers believe their imperfections will be made perfect in their purchases. Studies indicate that some people can even become addicted to shopping, or experience a kind of euphoria while shopping.<sup>18</sup> Those who develop such an addiction, however, tend to have low self-esteem. That's not a surprise – televised advertisements tell us our teeth are

not white enough, our hair not thick enough, our bodies not thin enough, our food not tasty enough. These conditions become consumeristic “sins,” for which we atone by purchasing the right product.

Twitchell suggests that we do not worship the things we have purchased, but instead hope to find meaning in the things we own. Twitchell says advertising adds value to products, and “by adding meaning to material, by adding meaning to objects, by branding things, advertising performs a role historically associated with religion. The Great Chain of Being, which for centuries located value above the horizon in the world Beyond, has been reforged to settle value into the objects of the Here and Now.”<sup>19</sup>

### ***So, what does all this mean?***

The preceding overview may seem somewhat disconnected, but ultimately my point is this: Cultural factors profoundly affect the people with whom we minister. We can no longer assume that our language is understood by others. Commandments became suggestions. Navigation of our mission field is increasingly perplexing because our worship times together increasingly look and feel like entertainment. Whether we admit it or not, we often create God in our own image, and pray like consumers. People are “spiritual but not religious” because it allows them to seem pious without having to change their lives in any way. They readily accept God’s promise to be their God (Jer. 24:7) because postmodernism gives them permission to define “god” in the most pleasing and entertaining way possible. Meanwhile, they reject the invitation to be God’s people, because to do so means to submit to boundaries, to change behaviors and to sacrifice for others – the polar opposite of their inclination toward entertainment.

But perhaps most profound is the way in which these influences have changed our ability to come together in Christian community. If postmodernism didn’t do enough damage, or the

compelling desire to be entertained rather than engaged, then the knock-out punch is delivered in the form of consumerism. Christians become consumers just like they are consumers in a store. In worship, a worship experience is judged “good” or “bad” based on what they “receive” during worship. If they don’t like the pastor’s sermons, the music, the youth programming, the way they have been treated by someone else in the church, or for any number of other reasons, they see themselves as free to go to another church. Our consumer culture has even produced a name for it: church shopping. The covenant is drained of any real meaning, and fellowship is reduced to spending pleasant time together – all because these cultural influences have infiltrated our congregations.

Obviously, from a human point of view, this puts the church at a disadvantage, but, as Jesus reminds us, “With God, all things are possible.” The following are suggestions for combating these influences:

1. Christians must resist the temptation to alter the proclamation of the Gospel in order to please people. All church leaders wish to be praised for their sermons and other efforts, but we must remember that it is far more important that, when we stand before the Lord, we hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”
2. The church must be a place where people find true community, which means striving for unity, reconciling with those with whom we are at odds, and making ourselves vulnerable by allowing others to know us so well that they are able to keep us accountable.
3. Pastors and other church leaders must encourage more theological dialogue. Church mailboxes are flooded daily with catalogues and booklets advertising new “adult education materials,” complete with video presentations. In my experience, leading these studies is relatively simple (all one has to do is follow the directors guide), but they often lack depth and I question whether they move people closer to God.
4. We must learn to listen before we speak. Postmoderns are willing to dialogue, but only if someone will listen with the same energy and passion with which they speak. Those who converse may not reach agreement, but they have heard one another, and done so respectfully.
5. Resurrect the use of faith statements – not as a requirement for membership, but rather as a proclamation of the Gospel that we have inherited. The message after all, is not ours to change.
6. Encourage those who leave another church and worship with you to consider why they left the other church, and to seek some kind of reconciliation before entering the

fellowship with which you covenant. The Kingdom of God does not grow when we simply exchange members.

The church is called to remain strong and prevail against cultural shifts, but we must also be aware of them and understand the way they impact our parishioners and our ministry.

Postmodern does not mean post-Gospel, and the use of tools in our proclamation must glorify God, and not simply entertain others. Understanding these impulses is crucial for us to fulfill the call of Jesus to go, baptize and teach.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> While I have relied heavily on the writings of Stanley Grenz and Neil Postman for the substance of this paper, I have done so purely for the sake of brevity. More resources are listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death : Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1986), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Purva Patel, "Praise for Technology: Tweeting During Church Services Gets Blessing of Pastors," (Houston Chronicle (TX), 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 145-46. I also recommend Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* ([S.I.]: Brazos Pr, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida's comments are drawn from a video of what seems to be a panel discussion and can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80a7sA4NcTI>. There was no date, location, or other such information posted with the video.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis R. Danielson, *The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining the Universe from Heraclitus to Hawking* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> A quote I heard often from a retired pastor who worshiped regularly in one of the churches I served.

<sup>13</sup> Several authors have suggested this. For more discussion on this issue, one may wish to consult Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens : Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching out without Dumbing Down : A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995). Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship : Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death : Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death : Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>17</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Rafael Rodríguez-Villarino et al., "Individual Factors Associated with Buying Addiction: An Empirical Study," *Addiction Research & Theory* 14, no. 5 (2006).

<sup>19</sup> Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism*.