

Theology Matters

Authentic Worship in a Changing World: What's Next?

By Robert Webber

My Father was born in 1900, grew up on a farm in Ohio, went by covered wagon with his parents across the U.S.A. and settled in Oregon. As a young man he went to school in Chicago, later served as a missionary and a pastor and died in 1985. Why did I tell you this? I did so to illustrate that someone who has lived through most of the twentieth century has lived within changes that have moved through the agricultural, industrial, technological and into the informational society. In one century there has been more change than in all the known history of the world!

While most of us living today have not gone through all these vast changes, we can see it all around us. I was particularly struck, for example, with the confluence of all these social periods in a recent trip to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Wherever I drove there were visual images of farms, industry, and new technological businesses. Horse drawn carriages mingled with cars, vans & trucks as we wound our way through small roads with working farms and bustling malls side by side.

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Worship has reflected this change. Briefly, all churches observed a traditional form of worship from 1900-1960. Then came the sixties. The revolution of the sixties and seventies were all very visible. The rise of secular humanism, the change into a more informal society, the music revolution, the political upheaval, the breakdown of the family, the emergence of sexual promiscuity, the overthrow of traditional values, the spread of violence, gangs and drugs as well as the emergence of cultural diversity and demands for power and recognition were all daily headline news. In this context the contemporary worship movement gained momentum and visibility and drew crowds that found traditional forms of worship boring and irrelevant. The boomers, born between 1946-1981 rejected tradition and led the charge to reinvent the wheel of the church and its worship. They were confident that the past was of no value and the future was an open highway with no barriers for the new revolutionary ways of a church free from the shackles of tradition.

This emergence of contemporary worship reflects and is integrated with the rise of cultural pluralism. Today churches are known by their style of worship as much as

Table of Contents

"Authentic Worship in a Changing World"	p. 1
"Pop Spirituality or Genuine Story?"	p. 6

they are known by their particular denomination. But since 1990 the rise of postmodern thought, the post-Christian society and Neo-pagan values have introduced new elements into the future of worship. This article looks at these new revolutions and inquires about the shape of future worship, a worship that goes beyond the contemporary worship of 1960-1990.

New Movements of Change

For many the world has stood still since the sixties. Not so. In the past forty years there have been new revolutions of thought taking place which have been identified as postmodern. The consequences of these new movements are now becoming widely discernable. They have created a whole new cultural setting in which the Christian message and its worship must be reformed.

The most important of these movements are those revolutions that have created a postmodern way of thinking; the changes that have moved us from a Christendom mentality to a recognition that the church now lives in a post-Christian era and must become missional in North America, and the shift into a Neo-pagan world where Christian values, especially the sanctity of life, have been eroded. The particulars of this change have been dealt with previously (see Dennis Okholm, *Theology Matters*, Vol 5, No. 4, Jul/Aug, 1999), so it is not my purpose to go over that material. Rather, I will concentrate on the current social and theological responses to postmodern thought, the post-Christian setting and Neo-pagan values now occurring. There are hopeful signs for those involved in ministry and worship and that is the particular subject of my writing.

Sociological Changes

It has been common for church growth leaders to say "If you don't go mega-church and contemporary in your worship, you will not survive into the twenty-first century." What these leaders are not taking into account is that history moves forward, but in cycles. Sociologist Francis Fukuyama calls the period between 1960-1990 *The Great Disruption* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999). There are, he says "signs...that the Great Disruption that took place from the 1960's to the 1990's is beginning to recede" (p.7) and that "the process of reforming has already begun" (p.271). His research suggests a return to religion "because the absence of community and the transience of social ties in the secular world makes them hungry for ritual and cultural tradition" (pp.278-279). William Strauss and Neil Howe in *The Fourth Turning* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997) argue for a seasonal rhythm of history that demonstrates how every fourth generation returns to the values of the first generation. The fourth turning is "a decisive era of secular upheaval, when the values regime propels the replacement of the old civic order with a new one" (p.3). The fourth turning "ends one epoch and

begins another" (p.6). It always follows an "unraveling" in which individualism is strengthened and institutions are weakened, when "the old civic order decays and the new values regime implants" (p.3). This fourth turning will occur through the leadership of the Millennial youth (born since 1981) and the "twenty somethings," especially those under twenty-five. The leadership of these Millennials will be a "back to tradition" thrust. They will "resurrect the old ritual of happy group singing, from old campfire favorites to new tunes with simple melodies and upbeat lyrics" (p.294). They will "mannerly, civic spirited," they will "lead a renaissance in student decorum and appearance," they will be "seekers of order and harmony," they "will not rebel, but will instead mobilize for public purpose" (p. 294).

Recently, both *Newsweek* (May 8, 2000) and *U.S. News & World Report* (April 17, 2000) ran positive cover feature articles on the Millennial generation (those born after 1981). The *Newsweek* (NW) article is on "What Teens Believe" and the *U.S. News & World Report* (USN) article is titled "The Good News about Teens." The evidence does show that teen arrests, drug use, pregnancy and school dropout rates are down (USN, p. 48). This may be due to the fact that parents of teenagers have become more attentive to parenting relationships. For example, the Institute of Health Study "found that kids who feel connected to home, family and school are better protected from violence, suicide, sexual activity and substance abuse" (USN, p. 48). While the church is not mentioned in the study, it is safe to assume that kids involved in church youth groups will be protected even more from involvement in destructive behavior.

In addition to the more positive profile of the teenager, three specific characteristics stand out and demand our attention. The first of these profiled in both articles is the revival of religion and interest in spirituality. Conrad Cherry, the director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University reports: "Prayer circles and faith-based groups like True Love Waits or Fellowship of Christian Athletes have proliferated in high schools and college campuses like so many WWJD bracelets. Christian rock festivals and CDs rival their secular counterparts, bringing the message out of the pulpit and into the mosh pit and tattoo tent" (NW, pp. 61-2). But, for the most part, these teens are not looking for absolute truth like their postmodern counterparts; they cross denominational lines, even religious lines moving among Christian, Jewish and Oriental religions with ease as they embrace "eclecticism" and act as "consumers in the broadcast marketplace of belief systems" (NW, p. 62). This search for faith "may be the generations most important signature" and is "more important than fashions, tastes or even behavior," says William Damon, director of the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University (NW, p. 63).

The second characteristic of Millennial youth is their commitment to service. The *U.S. News* (USN) reports

“about a quarter of all high school students today regularly perform community service, while an additional 40 percent do so occasionally” (p. 50). *Newsweek* estimates teen service even higher, suggesting that “as many as a 60 percent do some kind of community service, primarily through faith-based organizations” (p.63).

The matter of ethnicity is the third characteristic of the young. *Newsweek* felt this was such an important shift that an entire article was devoted to the subject. In “Color My World,” the magazine points out the general teen attitude toward race as an “outdated institution.” Statistics seems to bear this out: “Thirty years ago, only one in every 100 children born in the United States was of mixed race. Today the number is one in 19” (p. 70). Liz Short, the daughter of a white serviceman and Korean mother, sums up the new attitude: “Just look around. It’s great! Nobody is plain white, or plain black, or plain anything. Eventually, I’m hoping every place will be like NW, p. 74).

And so, how does this all add up? What do these trends say to us about ministry to youth and our worship? It says teens are open to the supernatural, ready to commit their lives to a cause they can believe in, ready for a leadership that sees the Christian church as made up of many tribes and nations, a church that is intergenerational and intercultural. What will reach these youth and draw them into faith? The baby boomer words and phrases were “big,” “flashy,” “slick,” “entertaining,” and “what’s in it for me?” The Millennial words are “real,” “genuine,” “relational,” “honest,” and “what can I do for others?”

How will this shift impact ministry and worship? At this point a new door has opened. When we walk through that door we better be ready. It’s a very, very different world than that of the Boomers. Its worship will be different than what we now know as contemporary worship.

Theological Changes

In addition to the sociological changes currently taking place, there are some very significant shifts taking place in theological thinking in response to the postmodern world. These changes will affect postmodern worship.

This same spirit of “let’s return to the tradition” is found in recent theological responses to postmodern thought. There is a general “weariness” with the theological innovations stemming from the sixties. George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) signals the future of a post-liberal Christianity in which “church doctrines are communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question....They indicate what constitutes faithful adherence to a community” (p. 74). Noted patristic scholar Robert Wilken in *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) concludes his book with an appeal to return to the

tradition. “The Christian intellectual tradition” he writes “is inescapably historical” (p.179)... “the Christian intellectual is...bound to those persons and ideas and events that have created the Christian memory” (p.180).

This same theme of “return to the tradition” is taken up by the movement of “radical orthodoxy” which has recently taken the theological world by surprise. The writings of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and others are turning modern theological opinions inside out. Milbank criticizes the modern attempt to shore up faith through the social sciences and declares theology as the “Queen of the sciences.” He argues that “theology has frequently sought to borrow from elsewhere a fundamental account of society or history, and then to see what theological insights will cohere with it.” Rejecting this approach to faith, Milbank argues, “It is theology itself that will have to provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, of the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith” (*Theology and Social Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 380).

Evangelicals are also becoming increasingly suspicious of the “fluff” of recent decades and the failure of evangelicals to have a more biblically and historically rooted faith. Recent evangelical writings like Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum changes in how to do ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), James Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), George Hunsberger & Craig Van Galder, *The Church between Gospel & Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), George Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) and D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) all speak the same message: *The road to the future runs through the past.*

What I see in the church right now is the confluence of the new sociological trends to return to a more traditional way of life with the new theological thrust to return to the tradition of faith, especially the faith of classical Christianity expressed by the Fathers of the church, the ancient ecumenical creeds, and the practices of worship & spirituality found in the great traditions of the faith. My final question is this: how does this confluence of sociology and theology to return to the past affect the future of worship?

The Future of Worship

I first became aware of the convergence between sociological change and classicism in 1999. In order to determine how this might affect worship I did a survey among 176 “twenty somethings” from 38 states, 14 countries and 41 denominations. These were evangelical students in Wheaton College and Graduate School. My purpose was to find out what kind of leadership we could expect from this group of people affected by a post-1990 “renorming of society” and the post-2000 interest in

returning to a more classical understanding of theology.

First, the survey was written in such a way that I could discover what the twenty somethings and their Millennial followers *do not want* in worship. Here is my interpretation of the negative data:

1. There seems to be a general reaction against the contemporary worship style. The highest negative response was given to entertainment worship (87%), to contemporary worship (48%) and to the music associated with this form of worship such as the band (63%), drums (59%), keyboard (56%) and guitar (38%).

2. There also seems to be a general dislike of the style of worship we associate with the 1950's traditional worship of the boosters. This shows up in the negative response to the choir (40%), the organ (38%), the neutral attitude toward hymns (28%) and ancient prayers (26%) which were probably associated with traditional worship.

Second, questions were asked to provide insight into the new directions the next generation of leadership will take. Here are nine conclusions from the survey:

1. The strongest and deepest desire of the twenty something worshiper is to have a *genuine encounter with God* (88%). Worship that is authentic and real, not glitzy and showy takes first place.

2. This longing for an encounter with God is not merely a desire for an individualistic encounter, but one that *takes place within the context of community* (88%). The experience of "being-in-community" is essential to good worship.

3. It follows that there is high concern to *recover depth and substance* in worship (87%). This new generation is tired of "fluff" and is drawn to depth in music, prayers and sermons.

4. That there is a deep desire to return to a *more frequent and meaningful experience of communion* should be no surprise. For here is where a deep substance filled encounter with God is most fully experienced on the personal level (86%). This generation is communicated to through rich symbols that communicate life-changing experiences.

5. Another significant way in which we are encountered by God shows up in the *demand for challenging sermons* (69%) and more use of scripture (49%). This generation wants to know what "God has to say" about me and the world.

6. Worship of the future will be *more participatory*. Worship is not a lecture or a concert done to us or for

us. Authentic worship is done "by" us. We are the players, God is the audience (73%). No more concerts, Please!

7. It is not surprising that this generation wants a *more creative use of the senses* (51%). The current communication revolution has shifted us toward a participation that is more visual. This generation wants to "see it, touch it, taste it, smell it, hear it."

8. Worship will become *more quiet, characterized by more contemplative music* and times for quiet personal reflection and intimate relationship with God (58%). This generation is tired of all the noise and wants some down time, some quiet.

9. Worship will *focus more on the transcendence and otherness of God* (45%) even as the demand for an encounter with the nearness of God remains high (88%). This generation is tired of the "god in my pocket" syndrome and wants to encounter the God who is beyond knowing.

Third, the question remains: What are we to make of this survey? Let me conclude with several observations.

1. First, I called my friend and publisher of *Worship Leader*, Chuck Fromm, to share the results of this survey with him and I want to share his insight which I found helpful. It was this: "Worship," he said, "should always be contemporary." He went on to say this: "By contemporary, I don't mean 1960's contemporary, but contemporary in the sense that it is always being incarnated into the current cultural situation. Our culture is changing, so it is no surprise that our worship tastes and style is changing as well." Chuck's response is the key to understanding the future and to getting ready for it.

2. The current change in worship taste and style is indeed a reflection of our shift into a postmodern world. The cultural world of 2000 is very different than that of the 60's and 70's. It is a culture tired of noise, turned off by phoniness, sick of glitz, and wary of the superficial. It is a culture searching for an authentic encounter with God, longing for depth and substance, craving quiet and spiritual contemplation and moved by visual, visible, tactile forms of communication.

3. I don't interpret the negative responses to music of contemporary worship as a rejection of the use of the band, keyboard, guitar, piano and worship team, nor do I interpret the negative attitude toward the organ and choir as a rejection of the more traditional elements of worship. Rather, I think what is being said is this: *We are tired of playing the worship game - traditional or contemporary. What we want is an authentic experience of worship, an encounter with God that has life changing results. What we don't*

want is phony, loud entertainment worship or dead ritualistic worship.

4. All these styles of music and instruments will still have a place in worship so long as they *serve* the goal of achieving a genuine encounter with God characterized by depth and substance.

Conclusion:

In this brief article I have attempted to show that there needs to be some suspicion cast on the overemphasis of a worship that is driven by the market and caters to a culture-driven pop form.

If I am right about the future impact of the current sociological trend to return to more traditional ways, and the current interest in recovering a more classical shape of faith, then it seems inevitable that the convergence of these trends will be reflected in the leadership of the next generation.

Where will they take us? My sense of history, my general knowledge of the worship renewal movements of the twentieth century and the shift currently taking place within the leadership of the new generation suggest we can see the birth of a new kind of worship. I call it “ancient liturgy with a contemporary flare.”

Space does not permit the full development of this kind of worship. But let me suggest that future worship will be Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical and Charismatic. It will

be Catholic in the recovery of transcendence, greater attention to ritual as performative symbol, more attention to ceremony, the space in which worship takes place and more frequent celebration of the Eucharist; it will be Reformed in its attention to the Word and the recovery of strong preaching; it will be Evangelical in its emphasis on the recovery of the Christian meta-narrative in structure, song, preaching, and Eucharistic prayer; it will be Charismatic in its attention to presence, the role of the gifts in worship and to the ritual of healing.

Finally, it is well to remember we live in a pluralistic world. All the styles of worship we currently know will continue to exist, some to even flourish. Ancient liturgy with a contemporary flare may not be the dominant style, but there are, as I have attempted to show, both sociological and theological changes that suggest its appearance and viability in a postmodern world. Each congregation needs to be open to how God, the Spirit, is leading their particular church. The ultimate and most important thing a congregation can do is to be real, authentic and genuine, and be open to God’s leading as they listen to the text of Scripture and of culture.

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Pop Spirituality or Genuine Story? The Church’s Gifts for Postmodern Times

By Marva J. Dawn

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Those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in

You” For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. Galatians 3:7-9

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We hear or see the word *spirituality* thrown around frequently in conversations and in the media these days, but that term has become so ambiguous as to be meaningless. How would the various forms of popular spirituality in our culture compare with the faith of Christians, who consider themselves grafted on to God’s

promises to the Jews as they worship the triune God? And what might that comparison mean for Christians' desire to be Church in order to serve their neighbors? What is happening spiritually in our culture, and how can we best respond out of our love for God and our love for others?

We live in a society that seems to have lost its way and is scrambling to find it by resorting to a wide variety of spiritualities. As one type of the many we could choose for examples, let us consider the "religions" presently finding their way into cyberspace. Stephen D. O'Leary examines some religious rituals found on computer networks and predicts that

we will continue to see old and new religions jostling for attention in the cultural marketplace and using available technology to reach new audiences. If current trends hold, computers and computer networks will play an increasingly significant role in the religions of the future.¹

What will characterize these "religions of the future"? O'Leary recognizes the following aspects in almost all of the transcripts he studied:

1. "an attempt to recreate or simulate real space in virtual space and to sanctify a portion of this space as a theatre in which spirit is manifested";
2. an emphasis on the difference between this space and the world outside or other places in cyberspace
3. "an assertion of the power of language to bring about wish fulfillment through the verbal act of declaring the wish within the ritual circle."

These observations lead O'Leary to conclude that the cyberspace rituals

appear as attempts to fulfill authentic spiritual needs now unmet by the major institutions of religious tradition. Yet there is an irreverence to these discourses...; they are ludic and playful, they revel in pastiche and parody, and they make few (if any) cognitive demands upon the participants. This conjunction of reverence and irreverence seems to me to be in some way characteristic of the spiritual situation of postmodern culture, which can neither dismiss religion nor embrace it wholeheartedly, but which ultimately leads to its commodification along with every other product and project of the past that is not doomed to be discarded in the ash-heap of history.²

As Christians, we have to ask why religious traditions are not meeting the "authentic spiritual needs" of these rituals' participants. What is the "spiritual situation of postmodern culture," and how should Christians respond to postmodernism? What are the needs and concerns of those who live in the postmodern condition as exemplified in pop spiritualities? How can Christians love our neighbors who might dwell in that condition? What might it take to offer a Christianity that could be embraced wholeheartedly?

So that we can understand much of pop spirituality and the needs of people in our culture, this chapter will investigate the postmodern condition and assess the spiritual needs it creates. We will find that one great challenge for people in our times is the lack of a genuine story, one that is coherent and gives meaning to their lives. Bear with me as we trace the roots and some of the aspects of postmodernism in order to see what the Christian community can be in the midst of it and what we have to offer in terms of the larger story that we all need and that calls forth wholehearted commitment.

Does This Really Matter?

The term *postmodernism* is used in a wide variety of ways and covers a wide variety of ideas as postmodern worldviews, attitudes, concerns, and results spread rapidly throughout the world and enter every major aspect of contemporary life. In university history departments, postmodernism leads to revisionist accounts of events and an ever-increasing fracturing of society into victim groups demanding their own stories. Postmodernist philosophers absolutize the relativity of truth, stress playfulness, and speak in random aphorisms. English teachers and visual artists who accept postmodern theories claim that there is no meaning in texts or paintings except what the reader or viewer brings to them.

Though postmodern thinking was once confined to these university humanities faculties and the intellectual elite, now even the sciences are exhibiting effects of postmodern thinking. Recently, at a small college in Washington State, a guest lecturer insisted that Newtonian physics (emphasizing such natural laws as the law of gravity) was simply the product of male oppression (a typical postmodern tenet) and should, therefore be replaced by an openness to other perspectives. A female professor, failing to get him to see reason, sarcastically responded that perhaps, then, this lecturer should demonstrate non-Newtonian physics by jumping up from the edge of a twenty-story building!

We are not concerned so much here with the philosophical and academic manifestations of postmodernism, but with the effects of postmodern thinking on the average person, for even young children now experience and react to postmodern conditions. My concern here is for how postmodern notions—often without our awareness—hit the streets, creating our children's worldview, and influence the people in (or absent from) our churches' pews. How do these notions impact the basic presuppositions and attitudes of those to whom the Christian community seeks to minister? My remarks will not detail aspects of the condition itself, but will paint a broad picture of the general social fabric so that we can then consider what Christianity has to offer in response and what leaders of churches can do to prepare their congregants for mission in the postmodern world. It is essential that you and I, as we seek to be Church, know all that we can about what drives the despair and nihilism

in our culture and how we can genuinely care for those who suffer in the midst of its postmodern condition.

Leszek Kolakowski describes the disastrous despair generated by late modernity's and postmodernity's flight from the past and from meaning as follows:

Culture, when it loses its sacred sense, loses all sense. With the disappearance of the sacred, which imposed limits to the perfection that could be attained by the profane, arises one of the most dangerous illusions of our civilization—the illusion that there are no limits to the changes that human life can undergo, that society is 'in principle' an endlessly flexible thing, and that to deny this flexibility and this perfectibility is to deny [humanity's] total autonomy and thus to deny [human beings themselves].

Not only is this illusion demented, but it sows a disastrous despair. The omnipresent Nietzschean or Sartrean chimera which proclaims that [human beings] can liberate [themselves] totally, from everything, can free [themselves] of tradition and of all pre-existing sense, and that all sense can be decreed by arbitrary whim, far from unfurling before us the prospect of divine self-creation, leaves us suspended in darkness. And in this darkness, where all things are equally good, all things are also equally indifferent.... But this is a belief that cannot be accepted in good faith and can only give rise to a desperate flight from nothingness to nothingness. To be totally free with respect to sense, free of all pressure from tradition, is to situate oneself in a void and thus, quite simply, to disintegrate.

To reject the sacred is to reject our own limits.³

The Movement to Postmodernism

We can best understand the present postmodern condition and its disintegrating pressures by tracing its roots in three particular themes of premodernity and modernity. We will limit the discussion to these three themes not to be reductionistic about the complexities of postmodernity, but because it will be especially helpful for our purposes here to focus simply on each epoch's understanding of God, authority, and truth.⁴

In the premodern world, everyone believed in some sort of god or gods. To understand the immense world alteration brought about by the modern epoch we must comprehend that, prior to the European age of Enlightenment which ushered in modernity, all cultures were devoted to their gods. All societies recognized the superior power of some kind of *supernatural* (theme A). Moreover, in premodernity those who were the bearers of knowledge about the specific culture's gods served as that society's *authorities* (theme B). They taught the rest of the people how to worship or appease the gods; they were thus the agents of truth, its promoters and practitioners. Truth was understood as *absolute* (theme C) because it came from

god, and it was thought to be reliably transmitted by the shaman, priest, or witch doctor.

The development in the Enlightenment of science and reason (partly as one attempt to end the religious wars destroying Europe) turned the center of societies from the supernatural to the *natural* (A). We have to recognize what a mammoth change it was when the locus of authority shifted from persons who passed on the truth of god to the scientific method, by which the truths of the natural world could be objectively discovered. Of course, there is nothing wrong with science—the first scientists were, generally, faithful Christians—but science increasingly displaced the supernatural, especially for those people who had only had a “god of the gaps” before the onslaught of scientific disproof. Those who attributed to God only whatever was not otherwise understood thus thought they had a decreasing need for the God of the Bible as science filled in more and more of the gaps. With the progressive ascent of technology, human beings assumed increasingly that they could control their own futures, that with just the right technological fix they could solve all their problems. Consequently, a “Tower of Babel” was built on the ground floor of science, with technology and economics comprising the next two floors. Science provided the insights, technology the power, and economics the wealth to combat ignorance, superstition, and poverty in a never-ceasing spiral of progress.⁵

Instead of trusting authorities, human beings insisted increasingly on their *autonomy* (B), and all truth, including what could be scientifically determined, became *relative* (C). Now God was no longer absolute, and religion was marginalized to the private sphere. People could simply say, “Christianity might be true for you, but it is not true for me.”

Development of the postmodern spirit was really inevitable, since modernity believed so firmly in the faulty Enlightenment idolatry of Progress. With the rise of science and technology, economics and communications, this modern myth insisted that everything would get better and better—that we could solve the problems of the world with enough scientific discovery and technological fixes. However, this modern fantasy was built on shaky foundations, without adequate checks on who controlled the power. The euphoria of the myth of progress began to give way to the despair and hopelessness of grave anxiety as the twentieth century unfolded into major world wars, severe economic depressions, the callous violence of Hitler, the world-changing terror of Hiroshima, the assassinations of leaders and massive betrayals by government in the United States, the environmental destruction and relentless dread of the Cold War, the *Challenger* explosion and Chernobyl and Bhopal, the recent frenzy of ethnic cleansing and tribalism in Africa and the Balkans, growing economic tyranny by major corporations and massive global unemployment, the emptiness and ennui of entertainment that continues to escalate its graphic violence and blatant immorality, the

salient loss of any moral consensus or commitment to the common good. Through all these graphic contradictions to “progress” the move to postmodernism has accelerated.

Postmodern theorists recognize that science had degenerated into a scientism that needed to be deconstructed. Technicism and economism also were idols, as were the grand narratives of truth, justice, freedom, and beauty. All these gods must be debunked; their proponents must be unmasked for the oppressive authorities that they are as they use these narratives merely to gain power. Thus, both the gods of the premodern supernatural worldview and the various modern myths of progress in the natural world are attacked by postmodern *deconstruction* (A), which leads to constant suspicion, loss of meaning, and rejection of any fixed point of reference.

Postmodern art uses a haphazard mixture of different methods and modes ironically juxtaposed; its literature uses amalgamations of various styles, genres, and even typefaces.⁶ Channel surfing with the remote control illustrates the postmodern condition: from a distance the viewer experiences no plot, but merely disconnected images and smatterings of feelings.

The failure of “progress” thus has led to postmodernist spirals of despair and hopelessness. The poor outlook for finding meaningful jobs leaves young people without any reason to learn, even as their entertainments deprive them of the brain space or skills to do so.⁷ We might as well amuse our selves to death.⁸ One very visible indicator of postmodern anomie is the immense proliferation of gambling casinos and lotteries.

As many scholars in the United States have noticed, postmodernism has moved young people from the alienation of the 1960s to the schizophrenia or multiphrenia (a legion of selves with no constant core of character) of the 1990s and 2000s.⁹ Having no point of reference, no overarching story, no master narrative, people don’t know who they are. Constantly shifting their image of themselves to fit in with the fads and fashions of the times, young folks especially lack a nucleus of identity, a personality that has been formed by moral authority and mentoring models. Furthermore, since they have no sense of themselves, they are unable to make commitments to another person in marriage or friendship or to a job, a vision, a vocation, a religion. Their subconscious cry often becomes, “Keep entertaining me, so that I don’t have to face the absence of my self.” Religion, in the form of pop spiritualities, is merely another technique for entertainment. Thus, the postmodern condition has moved people from both the premodern confidence in authorities and the modern confidence in self (autonomy) to the decentering (B) of both self (incoherence) and society (fragmentation) in contemporary culture.

Most important of all, the failure of the hyped-up promises of science and technology accentuates the loss of truth already inherent in modernist relativizing and in the rejection of authoritative structures or persons with moral authority. Consequently, the major characteristic of the postmodern condition is the repudiation of any Truth (C) that claims to be absolute or truly true. “Christianity might be true for you, but not for me,” our children used to say with modernist relativity—but now they are learning in their schools and from the media that any claim to truth is merely a means of hiding an oppressive will to power. The result is the malaise of meaninglessness, the inability to trust anything or anyone, the loss of any reference point or “web of reality” by which to construct one’s life.

As Edward Farley explains, many of our current social problems arise partly as

the result of a loss or diminishment at the very heart of culture—some would say the loss of culture itself—namely, a loss of the society’s powerful deep symbols. Without such things a society becomes alienated from past wisdom, develops institutions that have little connection with sources of humanization, and instigates styles of everyday life whose primary function is ephemeral entertainment and trivial comforts. The diminishment and sickness of all deep symbols, that is, constraining and guiding words of power, is at least one of the things at work in the larger societal infirmity.

He notes that the postmodernism that has led to such a loss of deep symbols refers

to the way institutions of leisure, buying and selling, governmental, educational, and corporate bureaucracies dominate and set the tone of everyday urban and suburban life. Alienated from the interhuman and from communities of human intimacy, these institutions are fairly emptied of moral, normative, and aesthetic dimensions.¹⁰

Though the philosophers use words like *random*, *playfulness*, and *banter* to describe their assessment of and approach to, postmodern life, the effects on young people seem more like catastrophe, confusion, and chaos. Lacking authorities in the modern world to guide the formation of their moral character, now children lack basic resources of principled disposition to know how to find delight in what is beautiful, to have compassion for those who suffer, to develop goals for their work and lives. Distorted by the entertainment mentality of their parents, a large proportion of the young people in my husband’s fifth-grade classroom have little desire to learn, insufficient conscience calling them to civility and propriety, hardly any sense of meaning and purpose in life, no sense that there is any truth except what they create for themselves.¹¹

Dutch theologian Arend van Leeuwen heightens the radical difference between our times and the previous theocentric

world by suggesting that there have been only two basic eras in all of history, which he calls the ontocratic and the technological eras. In the former, life was inherently a cosmic totality, in which belief in a God or gods transcendent to the natural world and to the life of human beings held together the contradictory and confusing elements of that life and world. However, comparatively abruptly, within the last three hundred years or so, this unifying notion has been rejected for “a multiform system of relationships, with no specific cornerstone, no single integrating element which gives all other things their reason for being.”¹²

The Denial of Meta-Narrative

Perhaps the most important aspect of various kinds of postmodern thinking for our practical theological purposes here is this loss of an integrating element, this general rejection of meta-narrative. The term *meta-narrative* refers to an overarching story that gives focus, cohesion, commonality, and meaning to life. When I lectured at a seminary in Oslo last year, we acknowledged that Norway’s meta-narrative includes the sagas of the Vikings; the grievous domination by both Denmark and Sweden; the courage of church and government leaders, of fishermen and schoolteachers in resisting Nazism; and, in present day, the people’s respectful relationship to the king, their leadership in world-class skiing, and their careful stewarding of oil reserves for the nation’s future. These and many other elements of that nation’s story link the people together and give them common understanding of, and pride in, themselves and their heritage.

In contrast, the United States displays much greater postmodern breakdown and fragmentation as various interest and victim groups compete with another. The larger, overarching worldview of the United States—including its founding by religious groups, the heroism of the pioneers, the splendor of its democratic vision, the nobility of its leaders—has in recent years given way to small stories of anger over the brutality of the first explorers and settlers against the native tribes, resentment against a government that has betrayed its people, indignation toward religion, and fear of the crimes and violence of our neighbors. Of course, much of this postmodern critique is justified. But the fact remains that we have lost much of our common, unifying story.

Postmodernism especially rejects the meta-narrative of Christianity and claims that it is violent and oppressive. It is alleged that in a pluralistic world no religion can be seen as universal. Meanwhile, retaining the modernist elevation of choice as a major value, many persons who claim to be Christians have assembled their own belief systems with a mixture of biblical elements along with hodgepodge of ideas from other traditions,¹³ together with a rejection of what they find “oppressive” in Christianity, such as the doctrine of the Atonement or narratives exhibiting God’s wrath. Thus, pop spiritualities are not manifested only by people outside churches.

The Biblical Meta-Narrative as Eternal

Those of us who believe that the Revelation¹⁴ of God does offer a genuine meta-narrative which is universally available and applicable and which is not violent or oppressive must especially remember that we make those claims, not because we stand outside of the biblical narrative as objective observers, but because God does. We agree with the postmodern thinkers that no one can make inflated claims about knowing the truth clearly without being influenced by our position in time and space, but we do not thereby give up all assertions of absolute truth.

Though postmodernists reject the Church’s claim of the Christian meta-narrative’s comprehensive inclusivity we believe that the triune God has disclosed himself through the Revelation given to a faith community stretching all the way back to Sarah and Abraham, incarnated in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ who lived among us, and passed on through the centuries by the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The main theme of the Revelation, incarnated and enscriptured, is the comprehensive grace of God given freely to liberate the whole world.

The biblical narratives can be seen as universally applicable for several reasons. The Revelation knits all human beings together because they are equally created by God, because Christ died for all, and because the Spirit has been poured out upon “all flesh” and the result of that outpouring originally was that each person heard the disciples speaking in his or her own language. The Revelation of the Trinity encompasses all persons threefold.

Furthermore, the Revelation carries within it counterideological elements¹⁵—texts that prevent us from siding with the voices of victors, prophecies against Israel herself, oracles calling for justice building and peacemaking, narratives of suffering and oppression that call human dominion into question, accounts of the misunderstandings of the apostles and the contrasting comprehension of the “little people.” Jesus himself is the most obvious element, for his submission to suffering demonstrates most graphically that God does not work through the power structures and ideologies of the world. Furthermore, on the cross he exposed and triumphed over all the principalities and powers of politics, economics, and religious institutions.¹⁶

Whereas the modern world rejected Christianity’s claims because they could not be scientifically proven, now postmodernity has opened people up to recognizing other kinds of knowledge and uses of reason. We can address the epistemological barriers to faith (that is, the issues of how we know what we know about God) by accepting the suprarational mystery of God and the community-attested Revelation and by recognizing the reasonableness of the Christian story as the best answer to the existential questions of who we are and why we exist, of what is

wrong with the world and what can be done out it. As Diogenes Allen explains,

Christian faith is not a leap *within* the order of the intellect, a leap which violates the very essence of that order. The leap of faith is a leap from the order of the intellect to the order of the heart. We leap because we recognize the reality of the domain of the heart, not because there is a shortage of evidence.

We recognize the reality of the order of the heart when we realize that we cannot achieve the well-being we seek from possessing those goods which can be gained by power and wealth (the order of the body) and when we realize that all questions of value and self-evaluation are legitimately excluded from consideration within the order of the intellect. Faith is called a “leap” because there is a chasm between the orders of the body and the intellect and the order of the heart, which can be spanned only by a change in outlook and concerns....

Once we see that the intellect is not able to satisfy the concerns of the heart, and take into account the biblical teaching that God is above the power of the mind to comprehend, we recognize the appropriateness of faith. We may embrace God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength because God is accessible to us through the good God promises to give us. At least God is accessible to those who overcome their resentment of being utterly dependent on deity for their well-being.¹⁷

Because the God who has disclosed himself to us is eternal, because the story of his relationship with human beings encompasses all eras, because those who believe in him already have eternal life and so share in God’s freedom beyond time, and because the Revelation offers the standard by which we can assess what is of God and what is alien to his purposes, Christians can retain from each epoch what is warranted for our thinking and reject what conflicts with the Revelation of God to us. Instead of a fundamentalistic retrenchment into premodernity, I believe Christians can be at the forefront in offering to the world around us a better postmodernism, not one of fragmentation and chaos, but a genuine story of community and faith.

Christianity and Premodernism

The Bible thoroughly proclaims and reveals the existence of God and the meaning of human life in relation to God. For that reason, Christians in the present age find it essential to retain from the premodern era its theocentric consciousness, its spiritual Center. Certainly our society *needs* to recover the attention to the supernatural (theme A) of cultures before the Enlightenment, for we can easily see that the massive social problems of the present world are due to human beings’ prideful rejection of God as the center of and reason for existence.

Because the Bible also makes it very clear that all human beings are sinful and that human perception of God is marred by sin, we must reject premodern attitudes toward authority (theme B). Though we acknowledge that God is absolute and absolute Truth (theme C), we no longer trust that the pastor or priest is able to pass on the Truth of God absolutely truly. We acknowledge that our comprehension of God is affected by our social situation, and thus we need the whole creation, including those who do not believe the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, to reveal more of what we can know only relatively. Thus, from the premodern age, Christians keep the focus on God and believe in his Truth, but recognize that we know it only partially and can share it with others not as authorities but as co-learners.

Christianity and Modernism

It is modernism that taught us we didn’t know everything, so we can accept its turn toward relative perception, though we do not extend that relativity to God himself since God has indeed revealed himself as sovereignly knowing, caring, and saving. Moreover, the Scriptures also warn us (for example, in Ecclesiastes) against modernity’s reliance on human science and technology to conquer human problems. The Revelation of God clearly exposes the myth of human progress and names as sin the oppressions that result from unequal distributions of “progress” and power.

Christian theology gave in too much to modernity. We allowed the rules of science to determine how we studied the Scriptures instead of retaining our sense that there are many kinds of knowledge and wisdom and that the Bible carries within itself guides to the ways to study it—with the foundation of belief in Christ as the Revealed and Revealing One and with methods of openness to the Holy Spirit, the counsel of the community, meditation, memorization, submission to the text’s formation, obedience, and trust. We allowed modernity to turn us toward entertainment in our worship and toward ministry to people’s “felt needs” instead of offering them what is truly needful. In a society of choice, churches became false democracies—for example, in deciding doctrine by majority vote—rather than communities of gifted people equipped by their leadership for a corporate life formed by the biblical narratives and guided by the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

Theologians recognize that the tools modernity gave us—form, source, historical-critical, and redaction criticisms¹⁹—are inadequate, for they tend to atomize the text and leave us with nothing that forms us as a people of God. For the sake of what can be gained from them, we can retain these methods from the modern epoch, along with its sense of the relativity of our own knowledge, but the postmodernists (and, even more, the Bible) show us that we need more—for example, the people-forming results of literary, narrative, and canonical approaches to the Scriptures.²⁰ These tools especially help us to learn the

genuine story of our faith and how it differs from the new spiritualities of our culture.

Christianity and Postmodernism

Certainly by means of critique already given in the Scriptures, Christians can agree with postmodernity's rejection of the modern world's myth of progress. We concur with the postmodern deconstruction of the technological mindset, of political ideologies, of Enlightenment hyper-rationalism. We have seen the failures of technology truly to fix our problems, the destructive use of science for evil ends, the inability of economics to bring equitable wealth to all. From the narratives of the Revelation, we know the source of these defects in human pride, narcissism, and greed.

What we cannot accept from postmodernity is its "wholesale rejection of objectivity and the uncritical celebration of perspectival understanding,"²¹ its total decentering, its reduction of life merely to a carnival, with myriads of consumerist opportunities and entertaining sideshows—including those of various spiritualities. We recognize the logical fallacy of postmodernity's rejection of meta-narratives, since its very insistence that they are violent and oppressive is itself an example of an imperious meta-narrative. Most of all, we observe the emptiness, the hopelessness, the despair, the lack of a coherent story created by postmodernity's repudiation of God.

We acknowledge, however, that there is no going back to "the good old days" of premodern absolute conviction, of infallible authorities who passed on God's truth. We readily confess that God's people throughout their history have not passed on the whole Truth of God, nor have they always passed it on in ways compatible with the character of God himself. We realize that Christendom distorted its convictions and authority with disastrous results in the violence it perpetrated, the greed of many of its leaders, the oppressions it fostered, the suffering it caused countless peoples. In past eras, for example, Christendom misconstrued the biblical formulation of "Holy War," which was actually a peace-building notion in the First Testament in that Holy War was intended to teach Israel not to fight and not to gain any booty from fight ing.²² The Crusades were an appalling manifestation of human perversion of the biblical meta-narrative.

The Biblical Meta-Narrative as Gift to the Postmodern World

Accepting the postmodernist critique of our *abuse* of the biblical meta-narrative, how can we recover the Word, the genuine story of God and his people as a crucially necessary gift for our time? First we must examine the meta-narrative itself, and then we must clarify how it forms us. The biblical meta-narrative is the story of a faithful God, of a God who keeps his promises. When we read it in its entirety, we realize that it is different from

other religious narratives because it focuses on God *in relationship* with a specific people.²⁵ There are many other creation accounts in religious literature, for example, but only the Hebrew/Christian Scriptures emphasize that this Creator God is also a Covenant God. As Deuteronomy explains,

Because the LORD your God is a [compassionate] God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.

For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of great power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power. (4:31-37)

The knowledge of God began with the LORD'S intervention in the history of Israel—and from there they discovered that their covenant "I AM" was the One who had created the world.

In the same way, we offer to people in the postmodern world an introduction to the God who loves them and wants to reconcile them to himself. We tell them the story of a faithful, promising God who demonstrated his devotion by always remembering his covenant with Israel. The dependability of the Revelation is established most profoundly in the resurrection of Jesus, for in the empty tomb we see the culmination of God's work on our behalf, the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah, the down payment on all God's promises for the future.

The Revelation, then, offers a convincing story of hope for people in our postmodern times. It proclaims a God of compassion and gracious mercy, who gives meaning and focus to lives tossed around by postmodern randomness. It announces forgiveness and atonement and reconciliation to those torn by guilt and lacking skills for relationships. It describes the Trinity whom our neighbors genuinely need—a loving Creator for those who think they have to create their own identity, a perfect Model for those who have no mentors, and an empowering Spirit for those who think they have to do everything on their own.

How the Revelation Forms Us

The Revelation is not a book of rules that gives us step-by-step procedures for life. There could never be enough rules to cover all the possibilities, and usually our response to rules and regulations is to resist them. Nor is the Bible a collection of timeless truths from which we draw out basic principles or goals toward which we aim. Since the Bible contains many dialectical tensions, opposing sides can draw out contradictory timeless principles, and often people use biblical goals to justify any means. Rather, to modify a basic schema from N. T. Wright,²⁴ the Scriptures must be understood as a master story with multiple narratives that form us as we are immersed in them. We become part of this genuine story as we then live out of the character shaped by all of God's Revelation.

Imagine that we found an unfinished drama by William Shakespeare, that we uncovered the first five acts and the last bit of the seventh.²⁵ How would we produce the play? We could try to write the missing parts, but we could never be sure if we got them exactly right—and we could not check out our attempts with the author.

Instead, we would try to find actors (perhaps from the Shakespeare festival in Ashland, Oregon) who were highly experienced in the theater, who knew Shakespeare's work inside and out, who understood all his writings and his life and his personality. Then they would have to immerse themselves in the acts of the new play that had been found. With this basis, they could improvise the missing parts.

Similarly, in the Christian community we have passed on the unfinished drama of God. The first act of the play is the creation, which teaches us that all the people of the world are brothers and sisters, designed to live in harmony with each other and the cosmos; thus the first act prohibits the violence toward other people against which the postmodernists rightfully protest. The second act of the drama is the fall, which enables us to understand the world's brokenness and destruction. Acts III and V include the stories of Israel and of the early Christians, respectively, to offer us examples of both disobedience and trust and to demonstrate the consequences of each. Act IV is the record of the life of Jesus and manifests God's covenant action on behalf of the world as the pinnacle of all God's interventions in Act III and as the foundation for the Spirit's work through the saints in Act V. We know a little bit of the end of the drama (Act VII) from the book of Revelation, but what we know of the culmination of the world is only a sketch meant to encourage us in the struggles of the present.²⁶

Act VI is where we fit in, formed by what we have learned in the preceding parts. Immersed in the meta-narrative, the grand story of the people of God—the commandments, goals, chronicles, poetry, warnings, promises, and songs of the entire Revelation—we are formed to act with the character of God's people,

imitating the virtues and deeds of God himself. And we have a great advantage, for, as we improvise Act VI in keeping with the spirit of the rest of the drama, we know that the Author is still alive!

What a great gift this meta-narrative is! It offers the people of the world around us a story into which they can place themselves and find forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present, and hope for their future.

The Christian Community as Gift to the Postmodern World

The most convincing testimony to the truth of God for postmodern people will be the incarnation of God's love by, and the embodiment of his purposes in, the Christian community of those being formed by the Scriptures to be Church. Many books about "Generation X" or the "Buster Generation" (young people in their twenties and thirties) emphasize especially their need for love and compassion, their feelings of rootedness and homelessness.²⁷ They are searching for genuine community, but they will not find it in the oppressive indoctrination of cults or in the kind of pop spiritualities found on the Internet. The online medium itself is "constantly faced with the evidence of its own quality as constructed, as arbitrary, and as artificial, a game played with no material stakes or consequences"; online rituals lack "the quality of physical presence."²⁸

Against this artificiality and the anonymity of computer networks, Douglas Groothuis points out, "Genuine community worthy of the name is largely fashioned out of the recognition of our embodied and sometimes awkward particularities." Groothuis cites Francis Fukuyama's *Trust: the Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, which emphasizes that "trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms...of other members of that community." Groothuis notes that such trust "is not easily established through the largely impersonal interaction of computer technologies." Consequently, those seeking to meet authentic spiritual needs in computer spiritualities will discover that developing the required behaviors and trust "when cyberspace is our primary means of interaction is difficult if not impossible."²⁹

The Christian community, to be genuine gift to the postmodern world, must deliberately be an alternative society of trust and embodied faithfulness to our story and its God. Rather than becoming enculturated and entrapped by the world's values of materialistic consumerism, of narcissistic self aggrandizement, of solitary superficiality, and of ephemeral satisfaction, members of Christ's Body must be Church by choosing his simple life of sharing, his willingness to suffer for the sake of others, his communal vulnerability, and his eternal purposes. Leaders in the Christian community must constantly equip parishioners for the mission and ministry of communicating the

Christian meta-narrative, of enfolding the world around them in God's love, of deliberately choosing and living out the alternative values of the kingdom of God.

As Leszek Kolakowski stresses, what is needed in response to the kinds of "spiritualities" described at the beginning of this chapter is a people who are being trained by faithful leaders to be Church and thus to incarnate the faith. He writes,

After centuries of the growth of the Enlightenment, we suddenly woke up in a mental and cultural disarray; we are more and more frightened in the face of a world that is losing its religious legacy, and our fear is well justified. The lost myths seem to be replaced less by enlightened rationality and more by terrifying secular caricatures or substitutes. We notice with a kind of relief various symptoms of religious renaissance, and the "return of the sacred" has become a fashionable topic. And yet we—and by *we* I mean philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists or historians—cannot contribute to this process; we can describe it—with hope or with dread—but we are not priests, and only through priesthood, prophecy, and acts of living faith can human participation in the sacred be maintained or reinforced.³⁰

The community gathers in worship to hear our story in the exhortations and challenges of our priests and prophets, in the retelling of the narratives of God's word and works, in the singing of Christianity's new and old exalted hymns of faith, in the remembering of our great creeds and doctrines, and in the prayers for God's faithfulness and ours in response. The Christian community also listens together for the Holy Spirit's guidance for our improvisation of Act VI. Then we go out from our gatherings to bring the story we have learned to the world around us. In the Christian community, people left homeless by the postmodern ethos can find a home. In the community's meta-narrative, those left to wander in the postmodern condition can find true roots and a story that embraces them. Most of all, in the community and the community's meta-narrative, the godless can find the true God.

The Truth of God as Gift to the Postmodern World

Premodernism asserted that there was an objective truth that could be known by those who had the skill to see it. Modernism objected that truth was relative, that different people saw truth differently according to their own situations. Postmodernism insists that there is no truth at all, that whatever truth there might be must be created by each person, for any larger claims to truth are in reality disguised bids for power. The meta-narrative of the Christian community compassionately demonstrates that Jesus is the Truth, an objective Truth who can be known. We know him only partially, but because we know *him* we

do not have to try to create truth for ourselves. Furthermore, his truth is not oppressive, for as Mark Schwehn emphasizes,

For Christianity, the quest for truth is bound up inextricably with discipleship, and therefore the shape of power is for them always cruciform....So long as Christians remember that, for disciples, power is not dominion but obedience, faithfulness, and suffering servanthood, they can rightly claim an integral connection between truth and power.³¹

The Christian story we offer to our neighbors introduces them to Jesus, the Truth, who brings healing to postmodern fractured souls. He is the Way to the home for which postmodernists search. He is the Life who gives us hope for eternity—and that hope "does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:5).

I believe that this is a critical time for the world and a momentous opportunity for the Christian community. Everyone around us is longing for a story that gives meaning to life. We have such a meta-narrative because of the God we know. I pray that, more and more, individual believers and the Christian community as a whole will be formed by the biblical story so that we can improvise well—and thereby draw to the triune God the world he loves and longs to save. Particularly I pray that the essays and sermons in this book will play a small part in equipping the Christians who read them with insights and skills for deepening the contribution of the Church's worship in offering the gifts our postmodern world needs so profoundly.

1. Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no.4 (Winter 1996): 805-6.
2. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space," p. 803.
3. Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 72-73.
4. Some excellent resources for further study of postmodernism and, in some of the following, of how the Christian faith can respond to it are Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); Brian D. Ingrassia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); John O'Neill, *The Poverty of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1995); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Post-Modern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation, and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995); Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).
5. Some of my general understanding of postmodernity and specifically this image of the Tower of Babel in modernity came from J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).
6. We saw these sorts of amalgamation in *Generation X* in Chapter 3. See especially Philip Samptson, "The Rise of Post-

- modernity” in *Faith and Modernity*, ed. Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, and Chris Sugden (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1994), pp. 29-57.
7. See Jane M. Healy, *Endangered Minds: Why Our children Don't Think* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).
 8. See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).
 9. See, for example, Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
 10. Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. x.
 11. For an overview of manifestations of the postmodern ethos in popular culture see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).
 12. This description is from William F. Fore, *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), p. 27. See Arend van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1964), and the works by Jacques Ellul listed in the bibliography.
 13. This is what sociologist Wade Clark Roof names a “pastiche spirituality,” in a *Generation of Seekers: the Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York Harper Collins, 1993), p. 245. For a more thorough discussion of his research, see chapters 2, 5, 6, 7 and 11 of Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-Of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).
 14. I will follow the example of French sociologist and lay theologian Jacques Ellul in capitalizing the word *Revelation* and preceding it with the word *the* to emphasize it as the decisive gift of a gracious God and the Revelation of what cannot be discovered by human intellect. Ellul also brilliantly observed, using linguistic tools, that the real hermeneutical gap is not between the culture/language of the first century and that of the twentieth century (For us the twenty-first), but between those who receive the Word as the Revelation of God and those who don't. See Jacques Ellul, “Innocent Notes on ‘The Hermeneutic Question,’” in *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage*, trans. and ed. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).
 15. This phrase is from Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, and elaborated with different examples on pp. 87-99 of that book.
 16. See Marva J. Dawn, “The Concept of ‘the Principalities and Powers’ in the Works of Jacques Ellul” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1992).
 17. Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, pp. 145 and 148.
 18. These wrong turns will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 5.
 19. These methods of study look, respectively, at literary genres, at the various sources or traditions from which a text came, at historical details that enable us to understand texts in their context, and at the work of biblical editors as they put together into a narrative the traditions available to them.
 20. These methods of study look closely at literary devices such as word choices or repetitions and grammatical forms, at the whole narrative of an account in order to study the broader structure and elements that give the story its form, and at the whole canon of the Scriptures, in order to see how a text fits in with what Jews and Christians have passed on as the entire Revelation of God.
 21. Mark R. Schwehn, “Christianity and Postmodernism: Uneasy Allies,” in *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, ed. David A. Hoekema and Bobby Fong (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 158.
 22. See Marva J. Dawn, “What the Bible Really Says about War,” *The Other Side* 29, no. 2 (March-April 1993): 56-59.
 23. New possibilities for wrestling with the text because of God's relationship with Israel are underscored in Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
 24. See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 140-143. See other's use of this wonderful idea in Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, pp. 182-184, and Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), pp. 138-39.
 25. Wright uses a five-act schema, but I find it more helpful to divide his fifth act in order to stress the differences in our lives (my Act VI) from those of biblical characters in immediate touch with Jesus (V) and to emphasize the end of time (VII) as an entirely new kind of drama.
 26. See Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness: A gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994).
 27. See, for example, Kevin Graham Ford, *Jesus for a New Generation: Putting the Gospel in the Language of Xers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), for a Christian perspective; and see the excerpts in Chapter 3 of this book from Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) and his *Life without God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) for the longing of those without God.
 28. O'Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space,” p. 804.
 29. Douglas Groothuis, “It Takes More Than a Virtual Village,” *Books and Culture* 3, no. 3 (May/June 1997); 14. See also his book *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hourglass, 1997).
 30. Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, pp. 106-7.
 31. Schwehn, “Christianity and Postmodernism,” p. 163.

Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

Study 5: The Book of Revelation Chapters 6 & 7

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Review

The opening chapter of the book of Revelation begins with a vision of a victorious Christ. Chapters 2 and 3, comprising the book's first scene, are the letters from Jesus Christ to the *Seven Churches* of Asia Minor. On one level, these seven letters are written to historic

churches that are each facing unique and individual circumstance. On another level, the seven letters capture the timeless reality of the church as it is in all times and circumstance. In chapters 4 we begin the second scene. Chapters 4 and 5 are a glorious vision of true worship. Creation, symbolized by four fantastic creatures, and God's people, symbolized by the twenty-four elders¹, are all gathered about God's throne in worship. It is in worship that the scroll of God's purpose for the world is revealed. Further, it is in worship that it is revealed that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is the only one worthy to take, receive, and unlock the meaning of what God has written (i.e. "*determined*") will take place.

Scene 2 of Revelation neatly divides in half. The first half, chapters 4 and 5, describe God's people, symbolized by the twenty-four elders at worship. The contrast between this vision and the next two chapters could hardly be starker. On the one hand there is the spiritual reality of God's people in God's presence, and on the other hand, the historical reality of God's people suffering in the world. These next chapters focus upon the suffering the church must endure in the world.

Chapter 6

In chapter 5 John saw a vision of a mysterious scroll, written on both sides, whom only the Lamb of God was worthy to take from the hand of God and reveal its meaning. The scroll was sealed with seven seals which now, in chapter six, the Lamb begins to break. Verses 1 – 8 describe the breaking of the first four seals. The breaking of each reveals one of the traditional **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**: conquest, war, famine and death. Note that with the breaking of each seal a horseman goes forth. Like the vision of Jacob's Ladder,² John sees the interplay between heaven and earth: an action in heaven determines what happens in our world. The horsemen are not *sui generis*.

At the same time, each horseman is introduced by one of the Four Living Creatures who symbolize the created world. In some mysterious way, these four, conquest, war, famine and death, are part of or arise out of creation itself. The judgment visited upon our world by the **Four Horsemen** is an immanent judgment; these are things humanity brings upon itself. Later, in chapter 15, we will encounter the theme of transcendent judgment when the bowls of God's wrath are poured out upon the earth.

Verses 9 – 11 portray the breaking of the fifth seal. John sees the souls of the martyrs *under* the altar. The people of God live in the world and with the world live at the mercy of the **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**. However, they face an additional hardship: the ongoing hostility of the world,³ a hostility that can lead to martyrdom. The martyrs John sees are *under* the altar. The image comes from the ancient sacrificial system. The blood of the animal sacrifice would be poured out at the base of the altar of sacrifice. They are *under* because their blood too has been poured out in sacrifice. In addition,

they are *under* because, while the altar, in John's vision, is in heaven, the martyr's sacrifice unfolds on earth.

The substance of the martyr's prayers is for the justice of God to be revealed. While the prayer is not selfish—the focus is upon God's name and authority it is, nonetheless, a prayer for vindication. There is a clear contrast intended in these verses between God's elect, who dwell in God's presence (chapters 4 and 5) and *those who dwell on earth* (6:10). It is one or the other, an either/or, not a both/and.

Verses 12-17 portray the events associated with the breaking of the sixth seal. The sixth seal is a symbol of cosmic trouble. It is the day the world will end. It is the day of Christ's return. The best way to put our understanding of these verses into their proper context is to read them in the light of Mark 13:24-27; Matthew 24:29-31; and Luke 21:25-27. In the breaking of the sixth seal, John is describing the same event; only he leaves out an explicit affirmation of the Second Coming. John is building drama and momentum. The scenes in Revelation are not to be understood linearly. Rather, they are layered, one on top of another. When we look at the *Trumpets of Warning* (chapters 8 and 9) and the *Bowls of God's Wrath* (Chapter 16) we will see a similar dynamic in which the vision takes us almost to the end, but not quite.

The immanent judgment flowing from the first five seals arises because humanity is sinful and corrupt. We bring death and destruction upon ourselves by our own actions. The sixth seal, describing the end of days, speaks of a transcendent judgment. It is the wrath of God, *who sits upon the throne, and...the wrath of the Lamb* (6:16) that is now revealed. The Lamb of God has now become the Lion of Judah. The human response is, as always, an attempt to hide.⁴ Of course it is impossible to hide from him who has *seven eyes* (5:6). This image tells us that he sees all things perfectly and in their totality.

Chapter 7

In chapter 6 we saw the Lamb of God breaking the seals on the scroll of God's purpose in history. It is the Lamb who breaks the seals, unleashing the judgments. John is telling us that he, the Lamb, is in control even of the calamities that come. What unfolds on earth is under his authority. John's vision is both terrible and comforting. It is terrible for he describes the realities of conquest, war, famine and death. These are terrible things indeed. It is comforting, for believers, for it tells us that behind the riders of the apocalypse stands the authority of the Lamb who holds firmly the scroll on which is written the predetermined purposes of God for our world. The events that come upon us, no matter how terrible, flow from what God has written and has now entrusted to his Son. Come what may, he is in control.

After the breaking of the sixth seal and the terrible events it unleashes, chapter 6 ends with a question: *Who is able to stand?* In other words, when the last day comes and God's wrath is revealed, who will remain? Who will be able to stand on that day?

John's question is in earnest. Now, in chapter 7, his purpose is pastoral as he seeks to answer it. He does so by a play on words. Those who will stand on the last day are those who have been *sealed*. John sees an angel (v. 2) who holds the seal of God. It is a seal that stamps the mark of ownership. Imagine a wax seal on a letter, or a brand on a cow. Catastrophe is held at bay, temporarily, until this angel goes forth to place the stamp of God's ownership upon those who are his. The contrast is intended to be stark: the Four Horsemen may ride out to destroy, but the church is indestructible for it is made up of those who are sealed, who are owned by God. They are the ones who trust. They are the ones who endure. That they are sealed shows that, despite the hardship they endure, they will one day stand before his throne. The point is to assure us that God's people are safe in the midst of the trouble of this world.

How many are sealed? The number 144,000 is clearly intended to be symbolic for in v. 9 we are told that the

number of those sealed is greater than can be numbered. The precision of the imagery of 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes is intended to suggest to us how precisely God knows his elect. Whatever the number may be, God knows his own, each and every one of them individually.

Note, from v. 14 that there are two criteria that define those who stand before God's throne. They are those who have gone through tribulation and they are those who have been washed, made pure, by the blood the Lamb of God. These are the two marks of those who are sealed: faith in Christ and perseverance to the end.

Chapter 7 ends with a description of God's tenderness and care for those who have endured hardship and tribulation here on earth. It ends with the promise that God will one day *wipe away every tear* (v. 17). Before we move on to chapter 8, spend some time in prayer imagining God speaking these words of comfort to you. What trial and trouble have you faced in your life? How do these verses bring encouragement to you at this time?

¹ Twelve each from the Old and New Covenants.
² Genesis 28:12
³ Cf. John 15:18, Matthew 24:9
⁴ Cf. Genesis 3:10

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