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A Royal "Waste" of Time

*The Splendor of Worshiping God
and Being Church for the World*

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Worship for Postmodern Times*

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

John 17:17-19

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

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How does the Church minister to people in postmodern times? Based on the discussion of postmodernism in the previous chapter and our recognition that the Church's meta-narrative and relationship with the One who is the Truth are supreme gifts for the society around us, what kind of thinking about worship services ought we to be doing in the third millennium? Many of the specifics will be considered in later chapters of this book, but here it is important again to paint broad brush strokes as we ponder the implications of our culture's postmodern condition for the Church's worship.

A Specific Example

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

The key question that this conversation raised is *not* what we should make worship to be in order to attract such people as this Canadian producer. The real issue — in our culture which is less and less Christian, which is post-Christian, sometimes anti-Christian — is this: What does it mean to be Church for the sake of the world when we worship and during the rest of the week?

The Answer Some Are Giving

Many leaders in churches these days simply frame their response to this Canadian producer in terms of the question of appeal. As a representative of this approach, consider these remarks from a review of my book *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* by Rev. David Luecke, writing for *Worship Innovations*. Referring to my endorsement of Kenneth Myer's distinction between gourmet food, traditional home cooking, and fast food as examples of high, folk, or pop culture,¹ Luecke says,

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

In the first place, we must note that Luecke's term, *contemporary worship*, is poorly defined at present in the various controversies over the subject. We will discuss this problem more thoroughly in Chapter 24. In addition, Luecke's comments and questions force us to raise several sets of deeper ones because his inquiries center around the issues of choice and preferences. Should these be our guidelines? The Scriptures convince me, instead, that in our response to the issues raised by the Canadian broadcaster's challenge the principal question must be, "What should the Church be?"

Luecke's review and other similar arguments raised in the worship discussions do not consider the essential, foundational biblical perspectives on the issues of who we are as God's people in community, what it means that we gather together for worship to waste time royally immersing ourselves in God's splendor to learn how to be Church, and, consequently, how we reach out to the world. Therefore, let us focus on the unbiblical notions illustrated by Luecke's review and ask the following questions regarding the responses

1. See pp. 183-88 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), referring to Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989).

typified in his words. (Keep referring to the quoted paragraph above as you work through the next section.)

The Questions We Should Be Asking

1. Isn't the gospel sometimes hard to digest? Luecke complains that worship should not be like gourmet food, which "can be hard to digest" — but if worship is always easy, are we giving its participants the true God? The triune God is mysterious, infinitely beyond our imagining, eternally wiser than we — a LORD who says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). Ours is a Christ who repeatedly says, "Woe to you!" (e.g., Luke 6:24-26). That can be very difficult to stomach.

2. Doesn't discipleship cost a lot in time and money? Luecke wants to avoid gourmet worship because "the cost in time and money is usually too high" — but don't we have a Christ who told a rich man to sell all he had, who warned those who wanted to turn back home that they weren't fit for the kingdom? (See Luke 18:18-27 and 9:57-62.) If our worship is not costly in terms of time, participation, and commitment, how will we teach what discipleship means? The medium must match the message.

3. Which kind of food service did Jesus choose? Since he participated faithfully in worship at the Temple and the local synagogue, in the ritualized festivals and feasts of Judaism, we could compare his choices to both home cooking and gourmet food. And what kind of "food service" does Paul signify when he urges us to "seek the things which are above"? Which kind of food service will give us "a foretaste of the feast to come"? How will our worship give its participants a vision of the heavenly kingdom? It seems we need a festival spread of gourmet cooking to be immersed in God's splendor.

4. We have to ask why the home cooking of tradition in worship is disappearing. Is the heritage that could enfold us in the language of faith practiced through the ages no longer important? Why have we lost the traditions that link us to people of faith throughout time and space? Benjamin R. Barber, director of the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University, critiques what is happening in the world in a book called *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Therein he laments the control of advertising images and an escalating world "monoculture" which is destroying social institutions and cultural folkways.² Should churches be

2. See Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

contributing to this reduction of culture, this destruction of musical “home cooking”?

5. Which need does Burger King food meet besides the need for speed? If our worship is like Burger King, how will we form the habits and practices,³ the customs and the manners of being the people of God? For example, how will we teach the royal waste of time, profound meditation, awe-full silence, reflection on meaty doctrines, musical depth, memorization of extensive texts, steadfast intimacy with the true God, the continuity of the Church, genuine community, earnest repentance, grieving lament, disciplined cross-bearing, timeless truth, the beauty of holiness, and faithful goodness? Will we learn those if our worship is like Burger King food?

6. I'm not advocating only one (French) gourmet restaurant. I am advocating a plethora of them. I would hope that our worship could sometimes include Hispanic as well as soul music, songs from Madagascar as well as Norway, from South Africa and Russia, from the fourth century as well as the sixteenth, the eighteenth, or the twenty-first. Will we learn diversity at Burger King?

7. No matter which kind of food service our worship resembles, we must ask whether it meets our *genuine* needs — the needs of our lonely, decentered, hopeless, postmodern world as outlined in the previous two chapters. What is good for us and our neighbors? What will really contribute to growth in faith? As we eat, are we growing stronger or just fatter?

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

These seven sets of questions and comments demonstrate thoroughly how wrong a question it is if churches ask only how worship can appeal to people. Various struggling congregations and denominations are not declining for lack of attractive or “contemporary” worship — remember that we will discuss this ill-defined phrase in Chapter 24 — but our churches are failing for lack of theological questioning and training, for lack of displaying a way of life worthy of being pursued. I am not an elitist about worship style; I always emphasize that many different styles can be used in truly community-building, character-forming worship — and the more diversity we can em-

3. See Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

ploy the richer our worship will be. But I am adamant that we must ask better questions about what it means to be a Christian and to be Church together, about how people are formed by the narratives of the Scriptures to follow Christ, and about pursuing the way of discipleship, which costs us all of our time and money and sometimes is very hard to digest.

Wrong Turns in the Face of Modernity and the Postmodern Condition

In the face of the ever-increasing fracturing of U.S. society, its loss of meta-narrative and negation of meaning, its despair, emptiness, and ennui, its deficit in moral consensus or commitment, its hopelessness and anomie, its rejection of authority and of any Truth claims — in sum, these destructive effects generated by the postmodern condition described in the previous chapter — what is the Church to be and do?

These are the societal illnesses for which congregations and their leaders must be concerned, rather than being concerned merely about the downward trends in worship attendance that accompanied the massive changes in U.S. society in the 1960s and have continued ever since.⁴ Responding *merely to the symptoms and not to the illnesses*, many congregations have taken drastic turns in recent years without adequate thinking about the theological, ecclesiological, and missional implications of those changes. Though the following list is far too cursory, it summarizes some of the moves that should be questioned:

- In the face of the relativizing of truth, some pastors and musicians are offering less truth instead of more, becoming therapeutic instead of theological. No wonder people are bored with “church” — and the preachers themselves are bored. Don't you find yourself much more interested if you have too much to say? If we recognize that Christianity always has too much to say — as the Gospel of John concludes, “Now Jesus did many other signs . . . which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah” (20:30-31a) — then we perceive that we have to give more content and not less, especially with the biblical illiteracy that characterizes the United States. (This topic will be pursued more thoroughly in Chapter 21.)

4. See Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

- With the proliferation of amusements and diversions in the U.S.-driven world monoculture, some worship leaders sacrifice content for entertaining form and confuse worship with evangelism and evangelism with marketing. As Calvin M. Johansson writes, evangelistic and worship forms should instead

reflect the type of life to which Christianity calls us. For example, nothing is gained by entertaining people into the kingdom, musically speaking, only to have them jolted into the reality that the Christian life is not an entertainment at all. . . . One's birthing process should be a foretaste of the lifelong faith walk toward maturity, which is God's goal for every Christian.⁵

(This confusion of entertainment and evangelism and worship will be considered at greater length in Chapter 9.)

- As society increasingly becomes more openly pluralistic and less supportive of Christianity specifically, some congregations blur their unique identity as the people of God, instead of accentuating it with loving commitment. To say that it doesn't really matter if you are a Christian, as long as you are sincere, is to be ashamed of the gospel and the scandal of our particularity. It would make as much sense if, after my next speaking engagement, I would randomly get on any airplane and hope that I'd wind up in Portland, Oregon, as long as I'm sincere. Certainly it is true that in a pluralistic society Christians err if we are imperialistic about our particularity, coercive instead of hospitable and inviting — but our faith is in a triune God of good news, and the truth of that God's grace accomplished and demonstrated in Christ remains unique and is uniquely to be shared. (This topic will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapters 29 and 30.)
- As the culture becomes more and more rootless, some denominations and individual parishes are giving up their heritage as communities with long histories and global connections. Many people in our society are struggling to find who they are and where they belong. The description of a movie shown on a recent airplane trip provides an apt illustration. The summary in the airline magazine said that a single mother, an architect, meets an every-other-weekend dad who is a journalist, and all they have in common is the same kind of cellular phone. How will they fall in love? Think of this story from their offsprings' perspective, and realize how pervasive in our

5. Calvin M. Johansson, *Discipling Music Ministry: Twenty-first Century Directions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), p. 15.

society such situations are: The children have been denied a completion to the story line of their original two parents; is a cellular phone enough to heal the rupture for them?

Children in my husband's fifth-grade classes with multiple parents demonstrate that nothing can ever totally heal the rupture. How can children without the security of completely faithful parents be able to trust who they are? In the face of such discontinuity and abandonment, to give up the roots of our faith, which goes all the way back to Sarah and Abraham, is a very harmful thing to do. We thereby give up our ties to our forebears in the Jewish and Christian heritage, our history of God's interventions, our connections to the global community of believers. (See the comments on our master narrative in Chapters 2-4.)

- In the face of the culture's loss of moral authority, some churches become tolerant to the point of ceasing to be a people formed by the narratives of Scripture. Why should we allow the relativizing of morals in our society to cause us to give up the clear instructions and moral patterns of the triune God in the Scriptures? In the name of a false compassion, genuine love is replaced with conformity to a society detached from any ethical center. (The sermon in Chapter 28 elaborates the goodness of God's commandments.)
- In response to the increasing clamor for choice, some congregations foster consumerism according to "felt needs" instead of embracing what is truly needful. Correlatively, churches are turned into a democracy in which doctrine and practice are decided by majority preferences (see Chapter 16). One result of this imagining that the Body of Christ is characterized by choice is bitter battles over taste (which will be discussed further in Chapter 15). Another result is that, in our current therapeutic society, everyone thinks he or she "needs" emotional coddling, whereas God has repeatedly taught us that Christians can *know* better. Especially in the face of suffering we learn that the will is stronger than our emotions, and that faith can trust a God who might even be momentarily hidden.⁶ Ministering merely to felt needs and choices cheats worshipers of the truths and maturity they need to engage their wills over their emotions.

6. See Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness: A Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994).

Hear Clearly What I Am Saying

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

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

Most of all, do not think that I am not interested in evangelism. I am, however, really worried about some misconceptions that are thriving on the lecture circuit and in the books of marketing gurus these days. I am intensely concerned for ministering to our neighbors in this postmodern world (as will be seen especially in Chapters 20 and 28-30). In fact, let us return now to the Canadian producer, introduced earlier in this chapter, who asked, "What will you tell churches to do about me? I don't go to church."

"First of all, I would like to be your friend," I replied, and she reacted with stunned silence. I told her that from our conversation I could tell that we probably had a lot in common, that we could become great friends. "We could have wonderful, probing conversations," I said.

She immediately inquired, "And would those conversations turn to the topic of faith in Christ?"

"Invariably," I acknowledged, "because Jesus Christ is the center of my life."

"And," she then broke in, "your life would show me that faith makes a difference?"

"Yes, I pray so," I responded. "And then I would hope that you might want to come with me to worship the triune God."

What We Need Is the Truth

What we need in worship is the Truth — the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help us, God! That oath from the witness stand gives us good guidelines for the witness that takes place in our lives and in our worship services.

The Truth that the Church has to offer to people caught in the postmodern condition must be shared in all its wholeness. To those who criticize Christianity because it has been (and sometimes now is) violent and oppressive, we must respond with the repentant admission that they are right. Beyond accepting blame for Christians' failures in history, we must recognize the whole truth that we remain corrupt and fallible. The Scriptures teach us thoroughly that our nature is helplessly sinful, hopelessly lost. That truth forces us to see that we cannot know the truth entirely, that our eyes are blinded by sin, that our understanding of God is only partial. But that does not negate the Truth of God nor our recognition of Christ who is himself the Truth, the Life, and the Way.

Against the postmodern rejection of meta-narrative — that is, of the possibility that there is any universal, overarching Truth that is true for all people in all places — I believe that Christians can humbly suggest the non-oppressive, all-inclusive story, detailed more thoroughly in the previous chapter, of a triune God who creates, redeems, and unifies as manifestations of his perfect love for the whole world. The Christian meta-narrative is the account of a Promising God who always keeps his promises — a Truth clearly seen in the First Testament history of Israel and most clearly seen in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again in fulfillment of God's promises. We believe that this meta-narrative will reach its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus comes again to bring God's promised gracious reign to fruition — and thus the meta-narrative of God's kingdom already initiated gives us all that we most deeply need of hope, purpose, and fulfillment in this present life.

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

Furthermore, our worship must contain nothing but the truth. Music, songs, Scripture lessons, sermons, liturgical forms, architecture, and other accoutrements of art and gesture and ambience are all means by which God invites, reveals, and forms us. If we use shallow (I did not say *simple*) worship materials, they will not reveal the truth about God. Instead, these shallow materials will shape shallow theology and form us superficially. Songs with cheap or sentimental lyrics or banal music belie the coherence and integrity of God. Sermons that draw attention to the preacher's eloquence or merely to the illusory or superficial needs of the listeners deprive the congregation of the formative power of the scriptural narratives for meeting our genuine

needs for repentant insight, constant forgiveness, authentic security, unconditional love, absolute healing, faithful presence, fruitful freedom, compelling motivation and coherent guidance for daily life, and eternal hope.

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

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

Equipping the Saints for Ministry

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

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

Worship as Truth that is thereby formative of character must be a major issue for our churches because the immense needs of our world require persons nurtured by depth and faithfulness, rather than by what is flimsy, if not

flippant (some examples of which will be given elsewhere in this book, especially in Chapter 11). It is essential that worship carefully equip the saints with the truths of faith so that they can witness to, and serve, their neighbors. The Church needs both preachers and musicians with great faithfulness to give worship participants what they need instead of what they think they need, to offer that which is needful instead of catering to neediness. Ultimately (though probably not at first), this meat will be much more satisfying than the pabulum of a schmoozy emotionalism.

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

A Vision

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

The postmodern world that surrounds us yearns for stability, morality, security, fidelity, faith, hope, and love. These deep needs can only be met through the One who meets our deepest need for Truth. Let us make sure that the worship services we plan and conduct present that Truth in all its clarity and beauty and goodness.