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Reconstruction of Tradition:

The Rebirth of Liturgy in the Postmodern Church

Philip Pfatteicher in his book *Liturgical Spirituality* sums up the essence of the beauty of liturgy. He says, "The liturgy that has grown through the centuries, rooted in the Bible, is a marvelous work of the human imagination. The resulting creation is a wonderfully rich assembly of the human arts" (23). Liturgy truly is an art. It is deeply rooted in historical Christianity and has been the common practice of the "high" churches for centuries. According to Pfatteicher, liturgy is "the church's primary expression of its response to the word of God it finds in the Scripture" (27). While some may disagree that liturgy is the primary expression of its response to God, most would agree that its implementation does contribute to a deeper connection with the God of the Old and New Testaments. This is one of the purposes of liturgy- to connect with Biblical history in such a way that one is able to actually become a part of that history. "We are not just playacting, pretending to be ancient people without modern utilities," says Pfatteicher. "...We remember the past in such a way that we find ourselves among those events" (71).

With the transition from modernity to postmodernity, one is found amongst a whirlwind of change. This change is all encompassing and does not exclude the religious life. Churches now must face a difficult dilemma- continue to operate within the context of the modern frame that is quickly becoming obscure or embrace the positive aspects of postmodernity in order to reach people who

would never respond to churches working within the contemporary agenda. Within the last ten years, and more intensively in the last five, many individuals and churches as a whole have recognized this necessity to embrace postmodernity and have decided to explore this new idea. The result has come in the form of the postmodern or emergent church. Within this new church there has been a return to historical Christianity, and thus a return to liturgy. Because a reinvention or reconstruction of the past is a major characteristic of postmodernity, the liturgy has taken on a new look in a new environment, but has not compromised the respect it demands.

So what exactly does the postmodern church entail? To try and define exactly what an emergent church is would be a contradiction of the spirit of postmodernity. Each church looks and acts in a very unique way; they are like fingerprints in which there are no two alike. The only way to fully understand this is to become a participant, to actually experience it. Like details lost in a print of an original painting, words on paper cannot fully describe the distinctive qualities that make up this type of church. Imagine walking into a large open room where directly in front is a small stage that is littered with musical instruments and equipment. Couches, chairs, small round café tables, and old church pews form a semi circle that radiates away from the stage. Each section of the walls is a different color, some with murals and designs painted on them. Each wall has various paintings and photographs hung on them, all original works done by members of the community. The room is lit only by a few lamps and lights directed towards the stage with the rest of the light coming from candles that are

strategically placed all over the room. Televisions hang from the ceilings showing paintings and mosaics from the Renaissance time period, as well as words to the worship songs and responsive readings. As the service begins, the pastor heads to the stage, clad in jeans and a t-shirt, and opens with a responsive reading taken from the *Book of Common Prayer* and leaves several minutes of silence to reflect on the beautiful words that were just recited. He mentions that paints will be set up on one end of the room if anyone would like to use this medium as a form of worship at any time during the evening. The band plays a half hour set of worship songs that consists of reworked hymns and well-written choruses with musical similarities to such bands as Radiohead, U2, or Coldplay. The pastor then delivers a well-prepared sermon about the redemptive elements seen in film and how it reflects on the perfect nature of God. As he closes, he invites the congregation to join him in taking communion and encourages people to come in groups to further promote a sense of community within the church. As the service comes to a close, once more the pastor returns to the stage to give the weekly announcements, which usually include where and when the men's, women's, book, and film groups are meeting that week. He also invites everyone to dinner at a local restaurant, which is where many close bonds are formed within the group. This is the basic format for a weekly service at a Dallas postmodern church called Journey Community.¹ This service structure is very unique and personal to this church because it is entirely shaped by the members within it. This is what makes most emergent churches so unique. Because of the high importance placed on community and acting together as a

whole, the members are given the freedom to construct what the church looks like under the framework of a biblical worldview. The pastors merely serve as a guide, leading people down the road of their own spiritual journey.

The remarkable sense of community is a defining characteristic of a postmodern church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Human love is by its very nature desire—desire for human community” (34). No longer is there a sense of rugged individualism among these groups, as was the case within the modern framework. Journey Community lives this very important communal aspect of the Christian faith. For example, an older couple that has been a very active part of the group fell on hard times when the husband lost his job. As a result, they were going to have to sell their wedding rings just to make ends meet that month. A few people heard about this and started secretly collecting money from other members to help this family survive. In the end, the family had enough money to pay all their bills and even put some away in savings. There is a deep sense of love and selflessness within the group, which makes it more than just a weekly worship gathering. It is a family that hurts together and laughs together and eats together; it is all encompassing, a lifestyle. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ” (24). This is the true heart of the emergent church.

To give a passing glance to postmodernity as a whole, one might draw the conclusion that it is nothing more than objective truth and a rejection of the “old-fashioned” way of doing things in order to allow each person the freedom to do whatever it is that they feel is right. When one becomes an active participant, he

or she will quickly realize that it is quite the opposite in most cases.

Postmoderns for the most part are vigorously seeking structure and direction. This is partly what makes liturgy so appealing. The strict, overly dogmatic workings of many high churches do not fill this structural void because it is just that—strict and overly dogmatic. The reinvented liturgy, however, provides a balance between this authoritarian high church and the structure-lacking contemporary church. The liturgy in the emergent church is structured; holding on to the original beauty and rich symbolism, yet able to be shaped so that it will still be relevant to the new generation.

The structure liturgy provides is just one reason why it is appealing to postmoderns. Another reason is its intellectual depth required to understand liturgy. In many churches, thought and reflection are purely optional. It is definitely not required, nor is it necessary to the understanding of the service. The postmodern culture is one that thrives on thought and reflection. There is a deep need to understand the world. These men and women are not satisfied with sitting back and watching the world go by without question. As a result, scholarship is placed as a high priority, something that is not optional. Liturgy requires thought because it is steeped in symbolism. One must reflect deeply on this symbolism in order to provide unity between it and the spiritual truth it is portraying.

The aesthetical element present in liturgy is another cause for its attractiveness to postmoderns. In the postmodern culture, the arts play a major role. This partly goes back to the intellectual aspect of the culture, but it also

portrays true life. In a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and fabrication, art mostly always portrays truth. Pfatteicher says, "Art does not gloss over troublesome and enigmatic experiences...for the welter of the world cannot be made simple" (25).

In the area of film for example, within the last five to ten years, there has been a shift in the independent circles in the type of movies that are being made. Until this shift, most film provided an idealistic look at life in which things always work out in the end. The independent filmmakers have begun to produce works that do just the opposite--instead of portraying the ideal, they show things as they really are. A film called *Requiem For A Dream* is the ultimate example of this. It illustrates the horrible affects of drug use by showing very disturbing images of the consequences of the users' actions. One does not walk out of the theater after seeing this movie with a smile on his or her face. The moviegoer is left with a very uncomfortable feeling to say the least, but this is exactly where social change begins. Instead of motivating society to strive to reach unattainable ideals, it can now see the depths of human depravity, which can ultimately lead to change. One student of philosophy said, "In order for us to regain a framework of virtue, artists and poets must bring us back."² This is a possible reason as to why the new generation is so attracted to art--because of this change induced by truth.

Liturgy is no different. It provides truth in the form of symbols and structured worship, but it does not "gloss over" this truth. Pfatteicher goes on to say, "Art and liturgy provide us with a vision of the completeness and beauty of

the whole” (25). Brian McLaren, pastor and author of several books on the emergent church, says:

On occasion we have enjoyed liturgical dance as an expression of worship, and the postmodern people respond. We should not be less rational, but we must be increasingly more, augmenting rational with the aesthetic. One wonders, How could such a beautiful message of incarnation be faithfully told without such artistic embodiment? (182).

The aesthetics portrayed in the liturgical setting provide a heightened ability to connect with the Creator. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen supports this idea in her essay entitled “Sacramental Presence in Modern Art.” She says:

In a theological seeing of art one becomes open to, experiences and interprets visions of the transcendent, of the divine, of the *deus absconditus*³ and the *deus revelatus*⁴ in Christ, bodied forth in surprising, gentle, challenging, shockingly immediate, or meditative fashion (216).

The ability to see the artistic symbolism liturgy provides, one is able to discover attributes of God that are otherwise inaccessible through other forms of worship. Thiessen goes on to say, “Art becomes a medium of imagining the here and not yet, of the *eschaton*” (217). Liturgy as art allows a glimpse of the perfect nature of God, God *absconditus* and God *revelatus*.

Postmoderns are also drawn to liturgy because it makes a connection between the present and Biblical history. Scott Gornito, pastor of Journey

Community, says, "We're realizing that the Christian faith is more than 200 years old. As people of God we are connected to the history and we *want* to connect with it." Liturgy is part of the history of the church. Not only do elements of liturgy symbolize historical events, such as the Easter Vigil and the Passover, but also these elements have historically been an important part of the church.

Pfatteicher says:

"This is the night," the deacon sings again and again. The proclamation says not..."Tonight we remember what happened long ago"; but, "This is the night" when God delivers the children of Israel, when Christ rises from the tomb, when heaven and earth are joined. All the events of sacred history become contemporary with us and we with them as separation in chronological time is overcome (79-80).

The Biblical history is what provides the foundation for the Christian church.

Through the Bible, one is able to participate in this history. Liturgy merely takes this written history and acts it out so that the partakers become an active part.

For example, the Bible says:

While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26-28 NASB).

This historical event initiated the practice of taking the Holy Communion, which is the central liturgical act. By practicing this today, one is able to connect with and become an active part of this meal. Like Pfatteicher says, there is a removal of time; it is no longer just something that is read about and understood as an event that happened two thousand years ago; It becomes the present. "In a religious celebration, participants emerge from ordinary temporal duration and recover sacred time in which a sacred event is reactualized" (Pfatteicher 79).

The communal aspect of liturgy is also a major reason for the postmodern interest. Liturgy draws a community together. Confession and communion are two elements that help achieve this. In public confession there is an immediate point of connection made between participants because no person is void of sin. Everyone faces the same struggles and temptations, which provides a sense of compassion towards each other. This compassion draws one's focus away from the self and onto the needs of others, thus providing a deeper union among church participants. In *The Book of Common Prayer*, confessional prayers are found numerous throughout, which is testimony to their importance. One in particular requires a strong humility in order to pray and honestly mean what is being spoken. It says:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have

done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us...(62-63).

This corporate confession calls for a unified agreement of the sinful nature of man. It involves an understanding of the need for reconciliation with the Creator in spite of this sin nature. When a community prays this prayer, there is a sense of openness that is felt throughout, thus allowing a deeper connection to be formed by members of the church community.

“Liturgy by definition is the work of the whole gathered congregation, all the people of God” (181) according to Pfatteicher. He also sees singing hymns, something that most all churches practice, as something that provides a shared element.

When a congregation sings a hymn, the process of identification is expanded. Each individual is united with the others in the assembly as they join in their common enterprise, and a unity is fostered and expressed by singing the hymn together. Hymns unify a congregation and can be a sign pointing to the unity of the whole church (224).

The theme of the spiritual life being a journey is portrayed often within the liturgy. This journey is never made alone. The practice of liturgy requires participation of an entire congregation for it to be properly implemented. This, along with the intimate sharing of the communion meal and the openness required in public confession make liturgy a very communal practice, thus making it attractive to the postmodern church.⁵

Outside of the high and postmodern churches, liturgy is somewhat rejected, especially among conservative evangelicals. It is a wonder why something that is such a part of the history of the church can be completely discarded as irrelevant to worship. Gornto sees this as exactly the reason. “[The contemporary church] sees the Protestant Reformation as the start of authentic Christian faith. There is no hunger for history.” Since the Reformation was the move away from all things that had to do with the Anglican and Catholic churches and liturgy was a part of this, it was no longer acceptable. “Conservative evangelicals don’t recognize the Catholic Church as the people of God,” says Gornto. From the time of the earliest churches until the Reformation, there is a void in the history in the minds of many Christians. There is also a distrust about anything that is not an original creation. Jason Mueller, mission pastor of Journey Community says:

There typically seems to be a fear of what [the evangelicals] can’t own, what they can’t describe and have power over. When you tap into historical liturgy you have to give up, you can’t control it. The evangelicals will be more likely to do a contemporary service because that’s their own invention.

To many, liturgy seems confining, not leaving much room for spontaneity.

Pfatteicher says:

Indeed, those denominations and congregations that pride themselves on not adhering to “formal” worship are even more bound to their order of items in the service than are the “formal”

churches whose liturgy changes from season to season and from week to week as the variable propers enliven the invariable ordinary of the liturgy (22-23).

The distrust of liturgy seems to come from a lack of knowledge. From the outside it may seem restrictive and even ritualistic, which may be the case in some instances. However, if it is done properly, it can open up new avenues that lead to a much deeper worship experience.

One of the goals of the emergent church is to provide a haven to those seeking something deeper, something to fill the emptiness that has been left after experiencing all that there is to experience in the world. It is also a place for Christians to experience new opportunities on their search for a deeper faith. One of the most impressive aspects of the postmodern church is its authenticity. In order to produce authentic faith, there must first be authentic people. There is a fear amongst many leaders on the front end of the postmodern church movement that the churches that resist the cultural shift away from modernity will be greatly impacted in a very negative way. No longer will churches be able to force their traditions on people and expect there to be no reaction to this. McLaren says, "Many contemporary churches painted themselves into a corner by saying that ritual, liturgy, symbol, and all that were wrong or evil and such, and that might make it hard for them to change" (147). Now that these are becoming more and more accepted, they are stuck in that corner with no way to react to these changes without the risk of appearing "liberal" or even "Catholic", which are the two attributes that many seem to fear the most. However, liturgy is a way of

physically connecting to the very aspects of the faith that these churches hold so dear. In the searching for answer to the questions of the Christian faith, one can only turn to history to find these answers. “The questions and challenges brought forth by the postmodern age bring out rethinking of the sacraments to consider the past—to revisit yesterday” (Boeve x). Liturgy is a language that speaks much more fluently than most have the ability. It is something that opens doors to new aspects of the God of history, creator of the minds of the individuals who first initiated the ancient church practices that are still relevant today.

Liturgy does not have to be a restrictive, ritualistic routine. The postmodern church strives to revitalize these practices. The focus should not be to “convey doctrine, to translate ancient texts or to promote ideology; it is to provoke an encounter between God and his people” (Senn 705). This may look different, but the meaning is still very much alive. Instead of responsive readings being read from *The Book of Common Prayer*, they are read from television screens. Instead of hymns being sung *a capella*, they are backed by rock driven guitar. Instead of kneeling before a priest to participate in the Holy Eucharist, member of the church community are encouraged to take Communion together. Whatever the case may be, the meanings behind these acts are not lost; if anything they are intensified. They are still revered as being sacred, they just look different than what is seen anywhere else.

[Liturgy], which risks trying new and challenging images, symbols and metaphors becomes relevant and exciting, as it aims towards inclusiveness and is open to transformation, to possibility—the

possibility of imagining new ways, of celebrating and interpreting the past and present, and anticipating the future (Theissen 217).

¹ For more information visit www.journeydallas.com. Other churches similar to this one include Ecclesia in Houston (www.ecclesiahouston.org), and University Baptist in Waco (www.ubcwaco.org).

² Chad Kidd

³ Hidden God

⁴ Revealed God

⁵ The points on the attractiveness of liturgy in the postmodern setting were adapted from lecture notes given by Dr. Naugle.

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