

# Christian Studies

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Waiting on the Slide  
*The Impact of Technology in the Contemporary Church*

Mel Witcher

**Praise and Worship Leader** [We are] seeking a Minister of Magnification. Skills needed: computer and multi-media presentation, drama writing and directing, praise team leading and development (classified ads, *The Christian Chronicle*).

We live in a culture fascinated by technology. From our climate-controlled homes protected by continuously monitored security systems to our state-of-the-art audio systems and cellular phones, we are surrounded by technological tools designed to make our lives more pleasant, efficient, and productive. We have not only grown utterly dependent on our technology (note the hysteria surrounding Y2K), but we unconsciously accept it as an unadulterated good. Upon reflection, this presupposition—that technology is an unadulterated good—is obviously naive, for since the Fall humans have at times used every gift from the Father to their own hurt. Technological progress is not the same as cultural progress; technological progress may in fact foster cultural degeneration.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The effects of television on education is a case in point. Educators in the 1960s believed *Sesame Street* would make learning both more efficient and entertaining. Jane Healy found that children who watch a great deal of television may, regardless of content, experience permanent structural changes in their brains that make learning to read much more difficult. *Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 47-55, 195-234.

We rarely pause to reflect on the role and effects of technology in our lives. The wholesale incorporation of technology decreases the opportunity, need, and ability to reflect by exponentially increasing the amount of information significant for our lives and the speed at which that information changes. We are “distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

Information has become a form of garbage, not only incapable of answering the most fundamental human questions but barely useful in providing coherent direction to the solution of even mundane problems . . . Information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning and purpose.<sup>3</sup>

Since the information glut spawned by technology affects all areas of our culture, it is not surprising that the church has also been distracted from considering the impact of technology—lights, amplified sound systems, computer-animated overhead projections, etc.—in light of the biblical purpose(s) of worship itself. These reflections will focus on: 1) a biblical basis for Christian worship; 2) examples of technologically-driven innovations in corporate worship; and 3) reflections on the alterations in purpose which these changes introduce.

### **Worship: A Biblical Rationale**

Worship is divinely commanded. Worship is the only appropriate response of the human creature to the transcendent Creator. To try to create a rationale or a set of goals for worship threatens to take for the human being the prerogatives of God Himself. Yet if worship is not to lapse into empty ritual or shallow entertainment, we must have a vision for our worship—not only the means (what we do) but also the ends (or goals).

Worship is, first and foremost, the declaration of the “worthiness”

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<sup>2</sup>T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” from *Four Quartets* in *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), lines 104-105.

<sup>3</sup>Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 69-70.

of our God. As the seraphim declare in Isaiah 6: 3, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is filled with His glory." Second, in worship the great acts of God are recounted so that worshippers may "put their trust in God" and "not forget His deeds," but "keep His commands."<sup>4</sup> Third, in worship we are reminded both of our faithlessness and of God's steadfast love which never ceases, despite our sin.<sup>5</sup> Finally, worship should enable us to view our lives—our circumstances and choices—in light of God's presence and purposes.<sup>6</sup>

These ends—declaring God's holiness, recounting His praiseworthy deeds, confessing His faithfulness despite our faithlessness, and learning to see our lives through the eyes of faith—must determine the appropriate methods we choose for worship. Our methods create an environment—a culture, if you will—in which biblical worship is either enhanced or enfeebled.<sup>7</sup> The question is not whether an innovation or change is permitted, but whether it fosters or impedes true worship (or in fact imposes a false set of goals).

### **Technological Innovations and Corporate Worship**

Having been told repeatedly that we live in a visual society, worship leaders around the country are encouraging congregations to "re-image" worship.<sup>8</sup> Not only do we project the sermon notes on the overhead screen, we now create computer-generated images behind the words of our hymns and scripture

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<sup>4</sup>Psalm 78:7.

<sup>5</sup>Lamentations 3: 22-24, 31-39; see also Isaiah 6:6.

<sup>6</sup>2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Galatians 2: 20.

<sup>7</sup>"The introduction into a culture of a technique such as writing or a clock is not merely an extension of man's power . . . but a transformation of his way of thinking—and, of course, the content of his culture." Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 13. Postman's reflections on the second commandment of the Decalogue—that a people who are called to praise a transcendent, universal deity would be rendered unfit to do so by the regular use of visual aids—call for careful consideration as we deliberate over the use and abuse of computer-generated visuals as an aid to worship.

<sup>8</sup>I participated in one such "worship renewal" conference two years ago. The following two paragraphs are recollections and reflections on that weekend and subsequent conversations with fellow conference participants.

readings above the pulpit. (Older leaders may be reminded of cartoons in which the audience was instructed to sing along by following the bouncing ball.) To create the proper mood, lighting specialists manipulate spotlights, floodlights, and houselights through well-scripted lightings and dimmings. To relieve boredom, video technicians provide panoramic visions of mountains and rushing rapids, rustic images of grassy meadows and old barns, and intimate close-ups of flowers waving gently in the breeze. To remind us of the brutality of the crucifixion, the video "image-makers" can now shift the visual focus of the Lord's Supper from the bread and the cup to a graphic video of a blood-spattered hand on a rough-hewn board.

Innovations in technology not only allow us to "re-image" worship, but to "re-hear" it as well. New and improved digital sound systems amplify not only the sermon from the pulpit, but vocal ensembles standing in front and the voices of hidden scripture readers seated within the congregation. The growth in utilization of technologically amplified "praise teams" ensures that all four vocal parts are always audible, which is promoted as an aide to the learning of new songs (and which also renders full congregational participation in the singing not only unnecessary, but redundant).<sup>9</sup> Cordless microphones free worship leaders from the tyranny of the pulpit and enable creative choreographers to manipulate the "audience" by shifting the visual focus to different locations around the sanctuary. The sound of disembodied voices singing, reading scripture, or praying can create a sense of visual and auditory disorientation similar to that created by contemporary rock music videos or fast-paced television commercials.

A recent experience illustrates our growing dependence upon

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<sup>9</sup>A few years ago I was told that, with the selection of a few carefully placed microphones and speakers, we could make a congregation of three hundred members sound like a much larger congregation. The question then becomes "why should a congregation of three hundred (or one hundred, or even forty) want to sound like a much larger congregation?" Our fascination with technological speed and efficiency complements our desire to be "successful" by growing big churches.

technology and the disorientation it can produce. The worship service began as the worship leader began singing while people were still entering the sanctuary. A large screen displayed the words of the hymns, allowing the congregation to join in the singing as they finished their conversations.

After a few words of welcome, the worship proper began with a series of songs sung without break—almost without breathing—between each song. Suddenly, in the middle of a praise medley, the computer-generated image on the screen jammed. The congregation, literally at a loss for words, began to murmur as the moments grew into full seconds of “dead air.” The worship leader finally looked away from his video monitor, smiled nervously, and explained “We’re waiting on the slide.”

### **Reflections on Worship and Technology**

Is that what we are waiting for? Is the right amplification or projection system the key to revitalizing worship? Instead of waiting upon the Lord to enliven our souls, we seem to be waiting on technology to enliven our worship. Modern dissatisfaction with worship is not related to the inadequacy Moses felt before the burning bush, or the sense of moral corruption Isaiah experienced in the temple, or the fear which made John’s knees weak. Our discontent is instead an impatience with the slow work of developing the mind of Christ, a disappointment with the time-consuming labor of building Christian character. Rather than forcing us to confess our moral and spiritual deficiencies, this dissatisfaction sends us to technology in search of “new and improved” ways to revitalize our worship—and mask our deeper problems.

Those who advocate new and improved worship methods insist that these changes are necessary to make worship meaningful to an entertainment-saturated culture suffering from attention deficit disorder. The goal of worship planning has become providing fast-paced audio and visual stimuli that elicits an emotional response from the worshipper. Worship leaders and ministers must constantly search for new songs and flashy visuals and unique sermons to hold the attention of audiences whose attention span is formed

by thirty second T. V. commercials.<sup>10</sup> It is as if no one realized that each “success” immediately excites the desire for more and different experiences.

Yet Jesus did not jump from the top of the temple. He rejected the temptation and reframed the question. The question is not whether God is powerful enough to save Jesus from death (or to work His will through state of the art sound systems and visual technology), but whether the action in question is an act of submission to and trust in the Father or an act which tests God, attempting to grasp and control His power and use it to our own ends.<sup>11</sup> In the first century Paul rejected the temptation to give the crowds what they wanted, even though he understood that “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.”<sup>12</sup> For those who plan the church’s worship today, there are at least three temptations we must not only resist, but reframe by asking better questions.

The first temptation is to entertain instead of worshipping. “In attempting to enliven the Church’s worship, many try to spice it up with new enthusiasm, engineered with the proper techniques . . . [but to do so] is to apply modernity’s solution to a problem that modernity caused.”<sup>13</sup> I once participated in a worship led by a “praise team.” During a pause, one of the team members remarked to the assembly that the service was particularly meaningful because he was about to leave for college. “This,” he said, “will be our last gig together.” Precisely! His words betray a fundamental

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<sup>10</sup>“One of the great conspiracies against philosophy and civilization [and faith], a conspiracy immensely aided by technology, is [the] substitution of sensation for reflection.” Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), 29-30.

<sup>11</sup>See Matthew 4: 5-7. In his discussion of the second temptation, Diogenes Allen writes: “If we call on God to relieve us, to intervene on our behalf *just as unconditionally as we call on drugs or machines to do our will*, then God becomes part of our technology. We would be masters, in control of the situation, even though we call upon God.” *Temptation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986), 41.

<sup>12</sup>1 Corinthians 1: 22.

<sup>13</sup>Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 70-71.

misconception—the confusion of worship and performance. This misconception is exacerbated by the introduction of the technology of musical performance—32 channel mixers, wireless microphones, spotlights, computer-generated visuals—into the corporate worship.<sup>14</sup> The act of leading an assembly of Christians in worship is not the same as performing a concert. When I “land a gig,” I am concerned about pleasing the audience (and thus satisfying the one who hired me). When I lead God’s people in praise and adoration, my concern is to please the One who calls me to the praise of His glory. Yet the temptation to lead worship in order to “entertain the crowd” is always present, and through the use of technologies associated with the entertainment culture, pleasing the audience is more easily done than before. We must reframe the question from “what method do people most enjoy?” to “what method most clearly focuses on the praise and adoration of God?”

The second temptation is to use worship primarily as an opportunity to assert one’s own special gifts, one’s own unique personality. This concern with the autonomous individual and his ability to express himself quietly slips into the worship, aided and abetted by the same technology which enables entertainers to display their individual skills. In an advertisement for a microphone, beneath the picture of a beautifully coifed model sporting a small crucifix, we are told that “Claire sings for one reason . . .” The mind conjectures “to praise God? To edify others?” The advertisers say “to bare her soul.” By purchasing this microphone, we will be able “. . . to capture the emotion of the female voice [through a microphone that] listens first, then speaks just the way you want to be heard.”<sup>15</sup> Here worship of God,

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<sup>14</sup>The classified ad at the beginning of this article demonstrates how naively the entertainment mindset is embraced. While prospective applicants were instructed to check the web site for the full job description, it is significant that the only skills listed in the ad pertained to the use of technology, drama, and music—all aspects of the ubiquitous entertainment culture. Perhaps it was assumed that anyone desiring a position as a minister would have more than superficial knowledge of the Bible. On the other hand, perhaps we can no longer safely make this assumption.

<sup>15</sup>*Technologies for Worship* 7 (May/June 1998): 13.

through the assistance of technology, becomes a means of self-expression, of self-actualization. We must reframe the question from “what method best showcases my/our talents?” to “what method most clearly portrays our dependency and God’s all-sufficiency?”

The third temptation, a temptation also immensely aided by technology, is to manipulate the emotions of the worshipper. From video projections to background music before worship to taped thunderstorms, the potential of technology to startle, to soothe, to engage the emotions is enormous. Yet is the engaging of emotions all there is (or even a major aspect) of worship? Over a half century ago, C. S. Lewis wrote:

It looks as if they believed people can be lured to go to church by incessant brightenings, lightnings, lengthenings, abridgments, simplifications and complications of the service . . . Novelty, simply as such, can have only entertainment value. And they don’t go to church to be entertained . . . The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God . . . But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping . . . There is really some excuse for the man who said, “I wish they’d remember that the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not Try experiments on my rats, or even, Teach my performing dog new tricks.”<sup>16</sup>

Worship which focuses on eliciting the proper response from the worshipper ceases to be worship of God. In worshipping God alone, the result should not be a flat, emotionless, ritualistic worship. Neither should it be an exuberant, giddy, “happy-times” worship. Worship must focus primarily on God—His praise and the retelling of His mighty works—and secondarily on our repentance and submission to His will. We must not confuse our feelings of repentance and submission with our acknowledgment of the One who is greater than all our feelings about Him. We must reframe the question from “what method most effectively touches the emotions?” to “what method most faithfully communicates the transcendent holiness of God?”

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<sup>16</sup>*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 4-5.

So what are we waiting for? Instead of waiting on technology to enliven our worship, let us learn through faithful worship to nurture those “habits of the heart” that mold us into His image. If the Lord wills and we live, new and improved technologies will develop to render today’s achievements obsolete, and our decisions regarding their use and abuse in worship will continue to be revisited. But the critical choice—to use the methods which most faithfully declare God’s holiness, recount His praiseworthy deeds, confess His faithfulness in spite of our faithlessness, and nurture a coherent vision of life in God’s kingdom—this choice may become difficult, but it will never become obsolete.

Finally, I return to my experience with the frozen video. The slide eventually came up after some thirty seconds or so. But while we were waiting, the worship leader reached for a hymnal, remarking “If the slide isn’t working, we’ll have to use the book.”

I agree completely.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>In Marva J. Dawn’s latest book *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), she has prepared a list of advantages and disadvantages of the use of overhead projections and of the use of hymnals for congregational singing. Although the title of the chapter, “In Praise of the Harder Way,” telegraphs her conclusion, the lists are well balanced. For those congregations considering changes in worship format, her discussion is insightful

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*Sermon*

Romans 1:1-7  
*Jesse's Truth\**

David Worley

By now everyone has heard Jesse Ventura's (former wrestler and governor of Minnesota) comments that "organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers."

Jesse is partly right.

While we were "weak" Christ died for us. He died for the ungodly. Together, "in numbers," we do find ourselves enduring the failings of the weak, including ourselves. We are not ashamed of the power we have experienced in the gospel of God, a power needed for the weak.

But . . . shame on us, at least some of us.

Where Jesse Ventura gets it wrong he gets it from many spokespersons for "organized religion," spokespersons for Christianity. Jesse understands Christianity as a grand medication scheme for human ills. God is the great pharmacist in the sky who dispenses relief . . . the Christian religion, a kind of medicine cabinet for the weak.

Jesse was not the first to detect this as a public face of Christianity.

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\*This homily was delivered in chapel at the Institute for Christian Studies, Austin, Texas on October 7, 1999. President Worley graciously consented to the faculty's request that it be included in this issue of *Christian Studies*.—*Editor*

Many others, not the least Marx and Lenin, have described religion as an opiate, or less severely, an Excedrin for the masses.

Such criticisms may be closer to the truth than we would like to admit. Too often the gospel is construed primarily as individual rescue from personal troubles and unease. The only news proclaimed is news affecting my immediate situation. It must be relevant to me.

Jesse is on target in perceiving much Christian talk to be talk about protecting me now or keeping me happy now or comforting me now. Certainly the gospel effects salvation, certainly the gospel is relevant to our real needs, but that is not the gospel.

The gospel is God's righteousness. It is first and foremost the gospel of God. It is talk about God and His name and not first about me. It is not first about Jesus as my personal savior. It is first and last about God, His glory, His honor, His name.

We announce, or at least we should announce, and repeatedly, that the most remarkable human event ever was actually a God event. The body of an executed man disappeared from his tomb even though police were posted and guarding the area. But such disappearance paled in comparison to what happened next. The dead man was clearly seen to be alive three days after his death by many, many witnesses.

Jesse Ventura has probably not been confronted with this message. Jesse's "minister" told him that he knew Jesse would come to church (to religion) when he needed to. After all, that is what Christianity is about. Coming to the medicine cabinet when we don't seem to be able to heal ourselves.

But again that is not the gospel.

The gospel is that this man who came back to life did not die again, that this man became the real King, the only one worthy of honor in politics, the King God had promised long ago through the prophets to the people of Israel, a King through the very lineage of King David of Israel, a son of Jesse.

Another Jesse, at another time, had a son named David. And the only true and living God had promised that the kingdom and reign of this son of Jesse would be an eternal one. The man who had come back to life was the one who inherited the throne of this David. He was now the ruler. He is now the King of Kings and Governor of Governors.

The gospel is God's way of making things right through the gracious reign of King Jesus. Such language and logic may not be altogether intelligible or, even less so, relevant to many. Paradoxically, it takes one asking and seeking for *terra firma* to understand language and logic of an eternal weight.

Jesse Ventura would like to be King but it seems nobody has confronted him with the only one worthy of being King, the one slaughtered like a silent lamb, the one who is now King, whose Kingdom spreads without assault or coercion, during the night, growing . . . outside the lights and noise of the political or wrestling arena.

Woe be unto us who have imaged Christianity in the image of Adam, seeking to go our own way, to be our own gods, seeking what looks good, tastes good and feels good. That is not the gospel. Jesse Ventura thinks it is. Who can blame him? Better blame and shame ourselves.

The gospel is God desiring to create, to create out of nothing, to create a people for Himself, a holy people, calling a people, calling them beloved, calling them saints, making things right in the image of His son, sharing His glory, with His children, by degrees.

The gospel is God honoring His name, preserving His name, protecting His name, extending His name. The gospel is God's righteousness, God doing the right thing, righting the wrong, unifying the universe, healing cosmic divisions, keeping His promises, sacrificing His own life within, without, absorbing hostility, seeking no revenge, permitting, intending, designing the sacrifice of life itself to define love, to define the heart of God.

Yes. As long as Jesse Ventura sees billboards announcing Christian classes designed to assuage my every conceived and conceivable weakness, Jesse has got it right . . . organized religion is (ironically) a crutch for the

weak minded.

But that . . . that is not the true gospel of God. And that is not the people God has called His own . . . whom he set apart, whom he foreknew . . . whom he justified, whom he is, now, by degrees, glorifying.

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## *Contributors*

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Jeffrey Peterson is Associate Professor of New Testament at the Institute for Christian Studies.

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Associate Professor of Old Testament at the Institute for Christian Studies.

William W. Stewart is employed with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. He also serves as adjunct faculty at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Michael R. Weed is Billie Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Mel Witcher teaches music and band at Brentwood Christian School, Austin, Texas.

David Worley is Professor of Bible and president of the Institute for Christian Studies.