

REACHING OUT
without
DUMBIN'G DOWN

*A Theology of Worship for the
Turn-of-the-Century Culture*

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II. Reaching Out without Dumbing Down

The roots of evangelism in our time lie in new understandings of worship.

James F. White, *The Worldliness of Worship*

Most of the issues discussed in this book have arisen over the last few years as Christian leaders began seeking new ways to attract the nonchurched to their worship services. As we have seen, the idea that we should change our worship patterns to attract people to Christ is a mistaken notion. Furthermore, such an approach does not grapple with the extent of the issues for those who do not participate in institutional Christianity. For example, what kind of reflection is being done regarding all the backdoor losses from the Church?

The “Dark Side” of Church Growth

David Barrett reported statistics for Oxford University Press that in a twelve-month period, 2,765,100 worship attenders in Europe and North America cease to be practicing Christians — an average loss of 7,600 every

day. This means that every week more than 53,000 people leave churches and never come back. The percentage of active Christians in the world has fallen from 29.0 percent in 1900 to 23.3 percent of today's population. Losses in the Western and formerly Communist worlds slightly outweigh Christian growth in the Two-Thirds World.¹

Something is seriously wrong if so many people do not find it worthwhile to continue participating in the Church! William Hendricks asserts that, though this "dark side" of church growth is neither reported nor carefully studied, it is growing. We must ask why, "despite glowing reports of surging church attendance, more and more Christians in North America are feeling *disillusioned* with the church." These are not people who "have given up on the faith. On the contrary, they may be quite articulate regarding spiritual matters. Indeed, some have remarkably vibrant spiritual lives" (p. 17). In this chapter we will bring together the main themes of all the preceding chapters in order to ask better questions about how the Church can, in its worship, reach out to the culture around it—and prevent some of the disillusionment.

Reaching Out without Dumbing Down

Christians were horrified in 1994 when an anti-abortion protester killed two people—a doctor and his escort—in his attempt to "save lives." The irony is too obvious. How can taking lives ever be consistent with the goal of preserving them? In the same way, many churches who want desperately to attract people to Christ miss the point by offering worship so shallow that not enough of Christ is proclaimed to engender lasting belief.

Some of you might protest that my analogy is too harsh, but I wonder if the practice of dumbing down worship isn't, in the long run, equally fatal to faith. If people are introduced to a Christianity composed only of happiness and good feelings, where will the staying power be when chronic illness, family instability, or long-term unemployment threaten? If worship is only fun, how will those attracted to such worship have enough commitment to work on the conflicts that inevitably develop because all of us in the Church are sinful human beings?

1. William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), p. 252. Page references to this book throughout this chapter are given parenthetically in the text.

Hendricks heard many reasons why people leave churches from those he interviewed—but not one of them left because the worship was too deep. Some departed because of inadequate intellectual challenge, musical ineptness, insufficient attention to developing character, or little sense of community. We saw in Chapter 1 that children who watch too much television actually have smaller brains than their peers. Are our churches creating smaller faiths if our attempts at reforming worship, as Leander Keck complains, amount to "little more than a substitution of the trivial for the ossified"?²

Worship becomes ossified if churches lose sight of their reasons for being—love of God and neighbor. Failing to educate well so that strangers and the uninitiated are welcomed, some parishes become elitist. Deficient in fresh theologizing, many lose their motivation to love God with contagious ardor. Inadequately conscious of the world around them, many derive from worship no stimulus to work for peace and justice in the world.

On the other hand, if, in their attempts to revitalize worship, churches merely speed it up and lower its substance, then they trivialize both God and the neighbor. They don't respect their neighbors enough to offer them the solid food of God's fullness. Moreover, too small a God leads to too small a concern for the neighbor in both evangelistic care and passion for justice.

Caring for "Lost Souls"

Chapter 2 sketched several prominent descriptions of the present culture so that we will be able to plan the Church's worship with better awareness of these forces. It is odd, however, that many churches lag so far behind the times instead of addressing these cultural issues in prophetic ways. Now when many prominent sociologists recognize the dangers of television's superficiality, some churches are becoming equally trivialized as they turn their worship music into mere entertainment. While researchers are discovering that members of the boomer generation are searching for moral authority, multitudes of preachers are throwing theirs away. Even as scholars notice that one stream of postmodernists are returning to their

2. Leander E. Keck, *The Church Confident* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 25.

roots to counteract the relativity of modernism, numerous parishes are rejecting the historic liturgy of the Church.

If we want to care for the "lost souls" of our society, the best way we can reach out to them is to offer them the richest resources of the Church. Let us give them the most faithful worship we can enact. Walter Brueggemann insists that the gospel must be both proclaimed and heard as

- intellectually credible in an unreflective society;
- politically critical and constructive in a cynical community;
- morally dense and freighted in a self-indulgent society;
- artistically satisfying in a society overwhelmed by religious kitsch; and
- pastorally attentive in a society of easy but fake answers.³

This list summarizes many of the needs of the boomer and bustler generations explored in Chapter 2 and counteracts the idolatries listed in Chapter 3.

Neil Postman's book on technopoly discusses a variety of attributes that are necessary to be what he calls "a loving resistance fighter." By substituting the word *Church* for terms denoting the nation, we can find in his commentary sage advice for equipping Christians with the means for counteracting the adverse effects of our society. Postman elaborates the word *loving* to urge that, "in spite of the confusion, errors, and stupidities you see around you, you must always keep close to your heart the narratives and symbols that once made the [Church] the hope of the world and that may yet have enough vitality to do so again."⁴ Think, for example, of the way in which the four hymns, played and sung as described in Chapter 8, nourished the people of Kazakhstan. Let us be very careful in the Church not to lose such symbols of the faith.

The first constituents on Postman's list describing those who resist technopoly are people "who pay no attention to a poll unless they know what questions were asked and why" (p. 183). This is a critical caution for the Church at a time when many practices are being changed in response to polls conducted by religious marketers who might not be

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 128.

4. Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 182. Page references to this book in the following paragraphs are given parenthetically in the text.

asking the right questions, questions that bear in mind the importance of keeping God as the subject of worship and nurturing long-term character and community development by means of worship. Worship surveys within congregations, too, often ask the wrong questions or are answered only by those with the strongest opinions and thus should not be given the inordinate weight they often assume.

Postman suggests several other valuable traits that are applicable to those who want to resist cultural forces destructive of worship. We can reach out more effectively to persons caught in contemporary culture if we are people

- who refuse to accept efficiency as the pre-eminent goal of human relations;
- who have freed themselves from the belief in the magical powers of numbers[.] . . .
- who are, at least, suspicious of the idea of progress, and who do not confuse information with understanding;
- who do not regard the aged as irrelevant;
- who take the great narratives of religion seriously. . . . ;
- who know the difference between the sacred and the profane, and who do not wink at tradition for modernity's sake. (p. 184)

Postman's educational proposal to counter the effects of technicization on culture urges schools to "make available the products of classical art forms precisely because they are not so available and because they demand a different order of sensibility and response." Since the Church's goal is to nourish deep sensibilities in worship participants in order to broaden our capabilities to love both God and the neighbor, we might join in Postman's campaign to use the arts for societal reform. He complains, "In our present circumstances, there is no excuse for schools to sponsor rock concerts when students have not heard the music of Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, or Chopin" (p. 191). We might suggest the same for churches, although we would want to widen Postman's repertoire to be more globally and ethnically inclusive.

Postman believes the artists he enumerates are relevant, "not only because they established the standards with which civilized people approach the arts," but also "because the culture tries to mute their voices and render their standards invisible." The Church should be among the social institutions that set the highest artistic standards, especially because

we need excellence and greatness to worship God. Postman warns that “our youth must be shown that not all worthwhile things are instantly accessible and that there are levels of sensibility unknown to them. Above all, they must be shown humanity’s artistic tools” (p. 191). In a culture of immediate gratification, the Church can, by means of its great heritage of music and art, teach habits of discipline and deeper commitment, of more thoughtful appreciation and careful reflection.

Idolatries

All that this chapter has said so far relates to the warnings given in Chapter 3 that the Church must be constantly alert to resist the culture’s idolatries and reject its gods. In a country that worships money, power, efficiency, immediacy, and control, genuine worship invites us to be generous, meek (in the biblical sense), reflective, eternally minded, and obedient. In a society that idolizes famous people, the Church affirms the gifts of all the saints and offers worship as the work of all the people. In a culture where success is measured by big numbers, the Church knows its message is not popular and seeks not to swell the churches but to deepen believers’ faith (a consequence of which will be that they will reach out to neighbors).

This is the ideal, but as Keck laments, in many places worship has become “thoroughly secularized.” Keck recalls an occasion when the invocation was

replaced with the rousing cheer for God: “Gimme a G; gimme an O, gimme a D.” An extreme example . . . but . . . [t]here will be no renewal of mainline Protestantism until its worship of God is redeemed from such silliness and the secularization it reflects. If the Australian historian is right in asserting that “secularization is a much deadlier foe than any previous counter-religious force in human experience,” then one can see immediately what is at stake in the secularization of worship — the identity and integrity of the church as church, that is, whether the church “stands faithfully in the presence of the One who is both the object and the source of faith.” And the antidote to this secularization is restoring the integrity of the center of worship — the praise of God.⁵

5. Keck, *The Church Confident*, pp. 26-27.

The only means for keeping worship free of idolatries is to keep God the subject. God frequently loses that role if churches insist on catering to the cultural idolatry of choice. Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby shows that “some churches today may be declining not because they offer too few choices, but *too many*.” As Bibby summarizes, “By being so graciously compliant, the groups have essentially served up religion in whatever form consumers want. They have not provided a religion based on what religion is, but a religion based on what the market will bear.” The repercussion for worship is that “attendance is just another fragment to be drawn on when customers find it convenient to do so. Ironically, religious groups are losing active attenders not because they are failing, but because they are succeeding” (Hendricks, p. 113).

Success is the most dangerous idolatry the Church must resist in its worship. One of Hendricks’s interviewees tried several churches after leaving one, but said, “They were all trying to beat [the church where I’d been]! . . . I felt that they were saying to themselves, ‘If we did this and we did that, maybe we would have more people, too.’” Hendricks adds that among the pressures on pastors

today perhaps the most severe is the pressure to put people in the pews on Sunday morning. So when any church appears to have discovered effective ways to do that, other churches that hear about it often wonder, “Would that work here? Maybe we should try it.” Before long, countless churches are using the same strategies, with varying degrees of success. . . . The issue is not how one’s congregation can be like some other “successful” (i.e., large) church, but how it can be the unique church that God intends it to be. Do we know what that church is? Do we know what particular purpose and mission God has called it to? (p. 115)

Rarely do congregations think in terms of their unique contributions as a response to an inward call from God rather than the outward statistics of markers. Bright exceptions might include inner-city churches that shift their musical style to match neighborhood ethnic changes or small parishes that seize their role to offer hope and stability in declining rural areas.

Worship Must Be Subversive

In order to minister to persons in our television, boomer, postmodern age and yet to avoid falling into society's idolatries, the Church's worship must be subversive, as discussed in Chapter 4. It listens to the needs of those to whom it reaches out but offers them more than they think they want in the fullness of Christ's answer to their unmet and deeper needs.

If worship is fulfilling its subversive role, it will present to church members and visitors alike what Gaddy calls "a confrontation with reality." When believers engage in genuine, God-focused worship, this can be for the non-Christian "like an unexpected slap in the face." As Gaddy describes it, the unbeliever first experiences "shock, then sensitivity." If the worship is authentic, the observer's personal awareness will be heightened, until the individual "suddenly sees what has been missed until the present moment, 'God is: God is here! God is reality, not merely a projection of optimistic ideology or an invention of noble fantasy. God is real!'" For everyone, but especially for the worship visitor who is not yet a believer, the profound discovery of God's reality will subject all one's "personal beliefs and behavior, priorities and sources of security" to serious questioning. We must ask, "What does this recognition of God say about how I have organized my life? How does it challenge my interests and the experiences, primarily professional and pleasurable, to which I have assigned the highest values?"⁶

How often does this happen? Does our worship regularly turn us upside down? If it occurred often, we would probably be much more intent on inviting everyone we know to participate in such worship, too. Even as the Samaritan woman left her water jar and ran back to the village to get her neighbors (see John 4), we would set aside our other, mundane concerns in our eagerness to share the water of life with our world.

In a surprising analogy, Martin Marty compares this subversive power of worship to the germ-killing ability of wooden cutting boards. Having read a report that 99.9 percent of existent bacteria died on the wood within 3 minutes after arrival while none died on plastic cutting boards, Marty takes the information "to promote the use of wood, as something natural and time-honored. As things of the spirit, as in acts of worship, should also be." Marty expands the analogy as follows:

6. C. Welton Gaddy, *The Gift of Worship* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), p. 42.

Plastic makes a fine first impression. It is smooth, synthetic, unmemorable and thus undisturbing to our habits and routines. Translate this to worship. Take for example the widely sung if not wildly popular "praise songs." They are smooth, synthetic, unmemorable and undisturbing. They touch the sensations but not the spirit. . . . They are not made to get into the brain cells where memories disturb or quicken us.

Then we hear the old wood stuff: shape notes, spirituals, "Southern Harmony," Genevan plain song, Gregorian chant, jazz, chorales, folk songs and, yes, even some modern songs with texture and abrasive character, and we wonder why these germkillers often get bypassed for the plastic.

One often still hears plastic, prepackaged topical sermons in which the preacher offers smooth and therefore unmemorable comment on the passing scene. Today some are rediscovering wood: natural, authentic exposition of basic biblical texts with shocking application to our time. Spiritual germs are less likely to survive.

Marty recognizes the other side of the dialectic, too, and protests worship that has become ossified by adding, "Wood, unwashed, untreated and misused, can be dangerous too."⁷

If worship only attracts and does not disturb or quicken, it will leave visitors and regular participants unchanged. For worship to be subversive, however, does not negate the possibility that it will be attractive to outsiders. As we saw in Chapters 5 through 7, worship that is planned with three essential guidelines in mind can welcome strangers with exactly what they need and most profoundly desire.

Worship That Encounters God Is a Lasting Attraction

As Chapter 5 elaborated, the key to true worship is for God to be its subject. In his *Exit Interviews*, William Hendricks discovered that many stopped participating in worship because of boredom. He summarizes, "It was not just that these gatherings were not interesting; they were not *worshipful*. They did little to help people meet God" (p. 260). As accentuated in Chapters 8 and 10, music style and liturgy type won't matter if

7. Martin E. Marty, "M.E.M.O.: The Curing Edge," *The Christian Century* 110, no. 6 (24 Feb. 1993): 223.

God is not found in them, if they do not incarnate God's self-giving or enable us to respond to God's grace.

Hendricks asked a friend who was a great preacher what the preacher's objective should be. Though this friend would not have considered himself an outstanding communicator, people came back consistently to hear his messages. He responded, as this book amplified in Chapter 9, "The point of the sermon is to help people meet God, to have an encounter with God. Somewhere during that message. I want every person to have the experience of hearing God saying something to him or her personally" (p. 282). Hendricks adds,

By now, the memo tacked up in the victorious Clinton presidential campaign headquarters is legendary: "It's the economy, stupid!" I think if I had to preach week in and week out, especially in a culture saturated with entertainment, I would tack a reminder to myself in the pulpit: "It's about God, stupid!" (p. 283)

This may seem elementary. We may think it unnecessary to reiterate. But many marketing strategies for attracting outsiders to worship do not focus enough on what is most essential. Interviews with nonbelievers indicate that parishes miss the point. George Gallop's landmark study *The Unchurched Americans* found that 41 percent of the U.S. population has no church connection, yet "six out of ten agreed that 'most churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion.'" Though 45 percent of the "unchurched" pray every day, 64 percent say they believe that Jesus is God or the Son of God, 68 percent believe in Christ's resurrection, and 77 percent had some childhood religious training, simultaneously "about half agreed that 'most churches and synagogues today are not effective in helping people find meaning in life'" (p. 249).

If we want our worship services to reach out to the nonbelieving, we must present the real God in all his fullness and not just a thin layer of generalized spirituality. Because of his research on why people leave congregations, Hendricks instructs churches to "*Teach people theology*." As he conducted his interviews, he "was stunned by how much 'folk religion' there is on the street." By folk religion he means "popular but inaccurate ideas" about who God is and our relationship with him (p. 284).

One of the most significant ways in which God is lost in the attempt to reach out to nonbelievers is if church leaders think that we can bring

people to Christ by using certain strategies or worship styles. If we think this way, we are confused about what we are doing when we worship, for, as Kurt Marquardt delineates, "The worship of God is its own end, while evangelism is a means to that end."⁸

Moreover, many other factors influence a visitor's readiness to hear God and respond to him. Gaddy reminds us, "No guarantees exist regarding a non-Christian's involvement in a worship service. The sensitivity and receptivity of each individual are crucial factors in a determination of reactions." Rather than trying to control the Spirit by their manipulations, God's people must let God be the subject, for, as Gaddy encourages, "a potential for good exists any time a non-Christian encounters a congregation devoted to the authentic worship of God." In genuine worship even a complete stranger "can sense adoration, profound conviction, honest confession, and intense joy that form a powerful witness to the reality of God."⁹

We dare not make worship too easy, for God is always beyond our grasp. Worship cannot be only cerebral or only emotional, for God is mysterious and wise. Worship must be unceasingly comforting so that through it God will address our suffering. It must be perpetually paradoxical so that we know we must worship forever. Strangers will have no need to return to our worship services if they can understand all that our worship offers of God in one Sunday gulp.

Worship That Forms Character Is a Lasting Attraction

Worship must convince us that we gain there what cannot be found anywhere else. Otherwise we could just as well visit our friendly therapist or a rock concert or whatever else uplifts our feelings. Authentic worship will teach us that we are desperate sinners, enfold us in gracious forgiveness, and empower us to go back into the world changed, eager to share God's transforming power with our neighbors and ready to do all we can to build justice and peace in the world.

Worship services exist primarily for the believers who want to wor-

8. Kurt Marquardt, "Liturgy and Evangelism," in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, ed. Fred L. Precht (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993), p. 26.

9. Gaddy, *The Gift of Worship*, pp. 42-43.

ship God — though we certainly also want them to be welcoming for those who do not yet know how to worship the true God. Also, most visitors come to a congregational worship service with a friend, and most conversions occur through the influence of a friend. Because of these truths, our primary criterion for worship with regard to individuals, as discussed in Chapter 6, is not what attracts visitors but what attracts them to lasting change and what makes members strong enough in faith to reach out to nonbelievers. We must constantly ask in planning if our worship is equipping people with the kind of character that will be eager to witness to neighbors, family members, work colleagues, or strangers. Is worship forming us to yearn ardently for the privilege of worshipping and serving God?

Many churches today do not seem to be nurturing such character in worshipers. From his “exit interview” research, Hendricks concludes that many Christians suffer from a “spiritual version of chronic fatigue syndrome.” This refers to people who have not left the faith and might not even have left their parish, but though they were actively involved in congregational life in the past, they seem now “to suffer from a low-grade virus of discontent.” Hendricks observes that “if you hear that hacking cough of joylessness enough times from enough people, you have to start wondering what’s going on.” He inquires, “Why is it that so many people don’t really *like* their churches — yet don’t dislike them enough to leave, either? At least, not until something happens to trigger an out, such as a conflict or an alternative that looks better?”

Hendricks guesses that perhaps a majority of Protestants feel this way about their congregations. This cannot be proved, but it is perilously significant “that at least *half* of those who claim to attend church attend once a month or less — not exactly a fervent loyalty to the program” (p. 152). What form must corporate worship take so that participants share the Psalmist’s longing for the “courts of the LORD”? How can it be that so many contemporary Christians feel such little need for the gifts of community worship?

As Chapter 6 underscored, nurturing believers’ character depends upon keeping God as the subject and object of worship. Hendricks exclaims, “*Theology makes a difference.*” With almost every person he interviewed, “teaching about God, the body of Christ, the nature of humanity, sin, salvation, spiritual growth, and other theological issues made a profound difference in people’s thinking, attitudes, and behavior.” (p. 262).

Wade Clark Roof’s research on the boomer generation revealed significant correlations between the disciplined training of children and their retention of the Christian faith. Roof discovered that “those brought up in a permissive child-rearing environment dropped out in far greater numbers and are also less likely to return to church or synagogue.” On the other hand, those who portrayed their upbringing as more strict “did not drop out as much, and if they did drop out were more likely to return to active religious participation. A disciplined approach to bringing up children appears to instill religious values and the habits of religious observance.”

Roof’s research statistics indicate that more rigorous nurturing of the character of children leads to longer lasting faith. Whereas 64 percent of conservative Protestants are presently practicing Christians (39 percent loyalists and 25 percent returnees), only 55 percent of mainline Protestants are (31 percent loyalists and 24 percent returnees) — and 12 percent of those currently participating have switched from mainline to conservative churches.¹⁰ Though we cannot derive any strong claims from these statistics, they do suggest that churches might be going in the wrong direction if they dumb down the faith in order to make it more appealing to the boomer generation. Those Christian communities that have taught the faith with greater thoroughness have a higher retention rate.

Action — in this case, worship participation — springs from a combination of knowledge, feelings, and will. Parishes that nourish the believer’s whole character will continue to attract visitors because of the authentic praise of God in their midst and outside their walls.

Worship That Builds the Community Is a Lasting Attraction

Though William Hendricks gathered from his interviews “no one overriding reason why people are leaving the church today” (p. 259), one of the common themes registered was a longing for community (p. 260). In my visits to hundreds of churches in my freelance work, I have experienced truly welcoming communities as an exception rather than the rule. I have

10. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 178-179.

learned the importance of Patrick Keifert's call for genuinely *public* worship into which anyone can enter, instead of *cozy* family-type rituals that leave many out. Furthermore, during worship times congregational members often do not assist strangers so that they can participate more easily, and after worship many Christians are too busy conversing with their own friends to welcome visitors.

It is crucial that worship nourish the character of both individuals and the community, for long-term attraction to the faith depends on reinforcing follow-up. Sociologists Benton Johnson, Dean Hoge, and Donald Luidens discovered that all the programs Presbyterian churches offered "did not produce a commitment sufficiently strong to sustain itself in a milieu of family and peers in which religion was rarely mentioned." Children were most likely to continue in faith if their parents were highly committed Christians. Thus worship services cannot have as their goal simply an appeal to nonmembers. We must plan worship with substance enough to root people in faith, to establish a community of care. Johnson, Hoge, and Luidens insist that "to be effective, even the best conceived program of religious education needs the reinforcement of a rich discursive follow-up in a circle of strong believers."¹¹

As Chapter 7 discussed, in order to be such a circle that welcomes and nourishes strangers, churches must be a "company of committed individuals whose lives depend upon the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord." Douglas Webster warns that we "must not obscure this truth by transforming a congregation into an audience, transforming proclamation into performance or transforming worship into entertainment." If we forget the distinction between public opinion and biblical confession in a false attempt merely to attract crowds to Jesus, genuine Christian community will vanish in the process. "If 'unchurched Harry' feels perfectly at home in our churches, then chances are that we have no longer an authentic household of faith, but a popular cultural religion."¹²

Congregations must really be the Church. This means that they won't appeal to masses of outsiders, but the attraction they do offer will be life-changing, lasting. As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon ad-

11. Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens, "Mainline Churches: The Real Reasons for Decline," *First Things* 31 (March 1993): 16.

12. Douglas D. Webster, *Selling Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 16-17.

monish us, the Church is composed of "resident aliens" who seek to influence the world

by being the church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be, lacking the gift of faith and vision, which is ours in Christ. The confessing church seeks the visible church, a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God. The confessing church has no interest in withdrawing from the world, but it is not surprised when its witness evokes hostility from the world. . . . This church knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most "effective" thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith.¹³

The Church's worship ought not to be so "alien" that it does not communicate with the culture around it, but at the same time it dare not be so "resident" as to empty the gospel of its transforming power. Chapters 8 through 10 explored the balancing of this dialectic in practical terms with regard to music, sermons, and liturgy. In all of our worship planning we will ask for forms that evoke the living community of faith, that train us to be the confessing Church.

The Church Is Responsible to the World

One critical way in which the Church can reach out to the culture surrounding it is through its influence on society itself. That a multitude of churches are failing in this outreach is manifested both in the perceptions of congregational members and in those of the public.

The people Hendricks interviewed said very little about the social implications of the gospel. He found it "most disturbing" that, "for the most part, there was a deafening silence when it came to making a connection between spirituality and matters of social concern — the poor, justice, human rights, the environment, issues of public policy, and so on." Hendricks admits that he might have posed the wrong questions, but he

13. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), pp. 46-47.

also wonders if the seeming lack of concern stems from a privatistic view of religion that focuses on piety and devotional life without extending the benefits of the gospel beyond the personal (p. 259). What about the public implications of faith? In a large city, my brother searched for three years before finding a strong congregation that integrally connected faith with the world's needs for justice in its worship.

In this television age, in which many persons' "information-action" ratio is vastly reduced (as discussed in Chapter 2), the Church must find ways to nourish active, public responses to the truth it proclaims. Our worship must not only build awareness of the world's needs under God's cosmic care but also challenge and empower participants to join in God's purposes for responding to those needs as agents of his care. We do not want to attract people to worship simply for their own benefit but also to engage them in spreading the generosity of God's love throughout the world.

The privatist trajectory of contemporary churches is also perceived by public observers. In a national poll, 62 percent claimed that religious influence on their own lives was increasing while 16 percent said it was decreasing—but only 21 percent thought that the influence of religion on American life was increasing, while 65 percent suspected that it is decreasing. Jeffrey Sheler's report in *U.S. News and World Report* suggested that "the extent to which religion is marginalized and excluded from public discourse may well be related to the growing trend toward self-focused religion and a 'spirituality turned inward.'"¹⁴ This is not to say that churches should secure a greater public role by "finding a stronger voice" in the "councils of government"; rather, as Avery Dulles notes, the Church's "proper sphere of competence" has always been "in religious and moral formation."¹⁵

Worship must primarily provide this formation. As God's passion for justice is proclaimed, God's people are nurtured in the same character. Unless God's global care is fully displayed in formative music, Word, and liturgy, worshippers will continue to have little influence on the public sphere.

14. Jeffrey L. Sheler, "Spiritual America," *U.S. News and World Report* 116, no. 13 (4 April 1993): 50.

15. Sheler, "Spiritual America," p. 50.

A Passion for the Gospel

In this critical time when churches are rapidly decreasing in numbers and influence, how should Christian communities respond? For many, the answer has been to change their worship style, but this is not enough, unless a congregation's entire ethos is changed in the process. In fact, the opposite is often the case, for the new worship styles of many parishes focus inward on the individual instead of outward for the world's sake. Then members and visitors only ask what worship means for them and what they can get out of it. Arthur Just asserts that this "has serious ramifications not only for our liturgiology and ecclesiology, but for our missiology as well." Outreach programs will continue to fail because, if "the vision of the worshiper is inward and the goal educational, then it is almost impossible to shape an evangelical vision for the church that is outward and transforming."¹⁶ Our worship should cause us to ask instead, Who is God? How does God want to use me and the community to which I belong for his purposes in the world? How does worship form us to be God's people for this place and time?

Worship for the sake of the culture around us will not cater to that culture but will clearly communicate to the pluralist public the basics of the faith.¹⁷ Leander Keck calls for a "new apologetics"—not "to dispel opposition, nor to make the Christian faith acceptable to that elusive thing called 'the modern (or postmodern) mind,'" but "to present the Christian faith and its tradition as an intelligible and plausible construal of reality" (p. 107).

Keck berates churches that are "spooked by the charge that concern for thorough and accurate knowledge, clear thinking, concise expression, and thoughtful use of the English language are the marks of an elitism that must go," as evidenced by the "shoddy thinking and incompetent use of our language" found in many worship attempts to appeal to the general public. God's people will fulfill their vocation for the culture's sake only if we can communicate effectively who we are, what we believe, and what difference that can make (p. 110).

16. Arthur A. Just, "Liturgical Renewal in the Parish," in Precht, ed., *Lutheran Worship*, p. 29.

17. Keck, *The Church Confident*, p. 105. Page references to this book in the following paragraphs are given parenthetically in the text.

This requires a passion for the gospel and for other people. Keck insists that we must recover the conviction “that one *ought to be Christian*,” that “the gospel is true enough that believing it makes a decisive difference at the center of one’s life.” Christians should be characterized by “a deep love and compassion for persons whose lives are in disarray because they do not or cannot yet rely on their Creator; are not yet rightly related to their God” (p. 116).

This double passion is nurtured by authentic worship — but sermons, interviews, and my personal experience all suggest that such worship is noticeably lacking in many churches. As a result, Christianity overall is gradually declining in numbers and influence.

Is there hope for the Church? Hendricks insists that there is. This hope is

the very sure hope of Jesus’ promises that He would build His church and nothing, not even hell itself, would overcome it. However, nothing in the promise obligates Christ to maintain “our” church. He has committed Himself only to building *a* church, *His* church.

So the issue is not how to get people back into churches, but how to make our churches into His Church. (p. 253)

This book’s questions and reflections are one attempt to help us be Christ’s Church more faithfully in our worship. It is not important that you agree with everything that has been said in these pages. What is important is that we keep asking questions and never think that we have arrived at the answer, for that will become a new idolatry.

The Church at the turn of the century must reject many reigning idolatries by asking better questions. As Neil Postman declares in his fight against some gods of the television age, “To ask is to break the spell.”¹⁸

18. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), p. 161.

12. *The Church as Its Own Worst Enemy: Is It Happening Again?*

Whatever else is true, it is emphatically not true that the ideas of Jesus of Nazareth were suitable to His time, but no longer suitable to our time. Exactly how suitable they were to His time is perhaps suggested in the end of His story.

G. K. Chesterton

The Origins of Unbelief in the United States

In research for his book *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief*, James Turner expected to find the usual answer to the question of how modern thought “simply dispensed with God.” Various pieces of the puzzle had already been studied — “Renaissance and Enlightenment skepticism, the effects of Biblical criticism, the impact of Darwinism on theology, the rise of scientific naturalism, the implications of post-Cartesian philosophy, and more.” This work implanted “a vague but compelling impression that the rise of science, and the spread of critical ways of thinking associated with science, undermined belief in God.” Recent historical scholarship highlights also “the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and technological change, as well as the less easily