

Some Thoughts On Understanding Postmodernism And Why It Matters for Leading Worship

by Kevin Twit, RUF Campus Minister, Bellhaven College, 6/14/02

edited by Rev. Blake Altman, Manna Christian Fellowship, Princeton University (12/23/07)

I. There is significant cultural change taking place

“The greatest of all illusions is the illusion of familiarity” G.K. Chesterton

“The shift from a factory-based to a computer-based economy is more traumatic even than our great-grandparents’ shift from a farm-based to a factory-based economy. The Industrial Revolution extended over generations and allowed time for human and institutional adjustment. The Computer Revolution is far swifter, more concentrated, and more dramatic in its impact.” Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (Harvard historian)

One of the most helpful books I have found in understanding these changes is Retrofuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes by Gerard Kelly (pub. by IVP) He lists 5 “posts” that describe our culture:

1. Postindustrial Technology: The primary driver of change is technology with its influence on economics, work, and thus our lifestyles. And the role of machinery and mechanization as a central icon in the shaping of society has been superseded by the growing central influence of digital processing and information technology. The influence of this new technological icon will be at least as revolutionary as machine technology was in transforming our agricultural economy. Moving from a “brute-force” to a “brain-force” economy will affect how we live, not just how we work! As Bill Gates says, “We stand on the brink of another revolution... When communication gets inexpensive enough, and is combined with other advances in technology, the influence of interactive information will be as real and as far-reaching as the effects of electricity.” One effect of the changes coming, for example, is the breakdown of the 9-5 society into a world where you work, shop, relate, etc. on your own time-table. (So how to schedule church?)

2. Postliterate Communications: Moving from static, and print-based to image-based and interactive communications. The sheer scope of data available is overwhelming. How might future generations, skilled in dealing with information that is fluid and transient, deal with questions of universal or long-term meaning? “With text everyone feels they “know” what you are saying, but with images it is left more to interpretation. It took years for me to learn how to paint. I imagine the web will take equally as long to become a real means of expression for me.” (Web designer Auriea Harvey) David Lochhead sees the implications for the demystifying of authority. “With the computer, the text is always tentative... In this medium, I control the text. The text does not control me.” When we use words like stupendous to describe laundry detergent, how can words have meaning anymore? (Marva Dawn) But lest those in the church despair, the Bible itself reminds us that words cannot “contain” God and His ways! (John 21:25)

3. The Postmodern Worldview: “An epoch approaches its end when its fundamental conviction begins to weaken and no longer inspires enthusiasm among its advocates” (Albert Borgman) Postmodernism as a worldview rejects the idea of over-arching truth that is true for all peoples and substitutes the idea that each community has its truth and we are free to

choose which one fits. Where modernism tried to scientifically find the “truth” that was at the heart of all religions, postmodernism rejects the idea that there is this kind of universal “truth” and instead invites us to enjoy the various truths that exist. Postmodernism is the result of the failure of modernism as a religion, an attempt to explain everything through the rationalistic scientific method. Postmodernism says there is a spiritual, unmeasurable side to life! As Stanley Grenz writes, “In eschewing the enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism.” I agree, but observe that rather than get too depressed, most postmoderns laugh at the meaninglessness. Postmodernism is existentialism with a wink.

4. The Postimperial World Order: In its simplest form, postimperialism has meant that the huge colonial empires that dominated the world at the birth of the 20th century were broken up in time for its demise. The old global context built on the assumptions of empires, colonies, and monocultural rule are giving way. In its place, a new world order will emerge founded on the competitive multiplicity of the planetary marketplace. The twin forces by which this new order is shaped will be those of globalization (chiefly through huge multinational corporations) and fragmentation. Even the nation-state itself will be shaken by fragmentation. “Here is the multiples world in which we live. Temple Methodist Church in San Francisco befriended a Ukrainian refugee woman who works in San Francisco’s most traditional German restaurant which is owned by an Arab who is married to a Chinese woman who runs a pizza restaurant managed by a Russian.” (Leonard Sweet)

5. Post-Christian Spirituality: There is a blossoming of spirituality among the young of Generation X and beyond, but for many this goes hand in hand with a rejection of the creeds of the established church. The primary influence on popular spirituality is no longer orthodox Christianity. (See recent Christianity Today article on the church of Oprah!)

II. Postmodernism is easier to describe than to define

Postmodernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is!” (Ernest Gellner)

Some noticeable shifts are:

- Skepticism about scientific rationalism and renewed spiritual openness (ex. X-files, spirituality books)
- People care more about aesthetics and gut feel, than facts and evidences in deciding what they believe
- A strong hunger for experience – even more important than money and fame for many
- A distaste for plastic mass-culture and a renewed quest for authenticity (No Depression, Bobos, O Brother)
- The adoption of cynicism and “outside” and “random” humor (Nihilism with a wink, Seinfeld)
- The attraction of story and stories, while being skeptical of meta-narratives
- The embrace of mystery and the skepticism about easy answers
- An intense desire for community (while not wanting to give up individualism)
- The channel-surfing, multi-tasking generation. Stay safe by staying free!
- The consumer culture makes us believe we are what we choose to buy!

- A longing to be part of something rooted rather than ephemeral (renewed interest in liturgy and ritual)
- Renewed concern for social justice, environment, and mercy ministry issues
- Change in management styles needed. Not top down but consensus building.
- Convergence as the route to the future: rather than new styles we have new combinations of old things

III. So why do we still need hymns in a Postmodern world?

The church is not a passing fad, it is something solid and rooted. “The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God” Leslie Newbiggin

The arts, stories, poetry, music all combine to sneak into the heart by the backdoor – something increasingly important for our ministry to the coming generations. “How will you reach this post-modern generation – a generation that cannot conceive of objective truth, cannot follow your linear arguments, cannot tolerate anything (including evangelism) that smacks of religious intolerance?” Kevin Ford (in “Jesus For A New Generation”)

“The challenge is to provide roots and wings – to bring young people into a sense of connectedness with the past that doesn’t rob them of their vision of the future.” Gerard Kelly. I think this quote captures what many 20-somethings have experienced through a re-discovery of hymnody and the new-found freedom to express these words of passion and devotion in music that resonates with who they are.

As many who have written about what the future may hold contend, the church can find help to know how to go forward by looking back into our rich tradition.