

Flight or Frenzy: The Church in a Postmodern Landscape

The church seems somewhat out of place in our world, almost displaced by our current culture. The media, whether it's CNN or CTV, seldom comments on the work the church does; the church's political influence is diminishing; and secularism has limited the church's influence, particularly in the public school system and on our university campuses.

The church itself has long been wavering in its response. There are those within its body who have retreated in the face of such cultural currents, setting up walls around themselves (and their communities) in an almost Anabaptist fashion. There are those who have slipped into a certain of apathy, absorbing most of what culture has to offer, discerning little themselves. There are also those who are actively seeking out appropriate responses to the culture within which we find ourselves.

Our current culture is unique, as most are. We live in what has been called "The Information Age." Most homes are now wired and online. The exchange of information is taking place at an unprecedented pace. It's easy to send e-mails across the nation at the click of a button, and television programming is ever multiplying. We can now watch sitcoms and reality television, documentaries and Hollywood movies, French dramas and worship services; and with split screen capabilities, we can watch them all at the same time.

We also live in an age of pluralism. The assumed centres of western thought—reason and God—have been challenged on a variety of fronts. There's an array of perspectives being given voice in the public arenas, from eastern philosophies to feminist agendas to environmental concerns.

In the midst of such diversity and exchange, however, we seem to know less and experience less intimacy. CNN is on 24 hours a day, but never deals with anything in depth. We're online, but not eating together with our families. Cables and wires connect our homes, but we've done away with our front porches and replaced them with decks out back. In an essay entitled, "Curiouser and Curiouser," Phil Apol put it this way, "Our language is revealing. 'Home' used to be where we lived, but now it is a place in cyberspace. Chatrooms are our new neighbourhoods; malls are our public spaces"¹

The question remains: How should the church respond to these ever-changing waters?

Phil Apol attempts to answer this question. A campus minister at Queen's University, Phil Apol wrote the essay as a commentary not so much on how the church should respond, but how campus ministry should respond to our current cultural trends. Most of what he says, though, applies equally well to the church as a whole.

Identified are three shifts in the way the church relates to the prevalent culture. To some extent, these shifts have already taken place, but I would argue that they must continue if we want to avoid having churches "where nobody lives."

The first shift identified by Phil Apol is from instruction to dramatization. In the past, the church's focus has been on teaching the biblical narrative. The church has placed a great deal of emphasis on the instruction of church doctrine and the old-style, teacher-centred catechism classes.

¹ Apol, Philip A. "Curiouser and Curiouser," (Unpublished), p. 1.

We live, however, in a time of decreasing attention spans. Our culture is increasingly visual. Flashing images are everywhere, on billboards and televisions, vehicle consoles and store windows. I'd argue that the church needs to shift its emphasis in ministry, from the instruction to the dramatization of our faith. We need to tell faith-filled stories, making them central to our worship experience, telling the biblical narrative "in ways reminiscent of the early church" with dramas and testimonies.² We need to show others that our faith is real, not just a textbook reality.

The second shift that Phil Apol identifies is a commentary on how we relate with one another; the shift identified is from judgment to accompaniment. In the past, the church was filled with judgment, and to some extent, still is. Those who left their spouse; those who came out of the closet in regards to their sexual orientation; those who drank too much: these people were ostracized by fellow church members, left out of the church's fellowship.

If our churches want to move forward, they need to replace judgmental hearts with a desire to walk along side those who are hurting. We have to do more than respect those who have made different decisions; we have to be with them. A church should be a place of connections; it should provide the intimacy that our online and wired culture so desperately needs.

The third shift that is identified in the essay is one that is hard for some of us to swallow—a shift from the institution to the body. This shift needs considerable explanation. Noted by Phil Apol is the church's tendency to focus on the institutional and spiritual aspects of faith, spending little time on the material or physical aspects. The church has been an intellectual haven, spending too much time preaching and teaching, discussing and reading.

In the meantime, we neglect the way our faith is embodied in living, breathing persons. We forget the importance of bodily expressions of our faith. "Body, blood, water, fire, tears, ashes, oil, and bread: these substances recur again and again in the grand story of Christian salvation."³ As a church body, we need to spend more time touching and tasting in our worship services. We need to reincorporate some of the physical, almost mysterious, rituals lost in the Reformation; we need to spend more time trying to meet people's basic physical needs.

Our world, as confusing as it may be, is our Lord's—every square inch of it. As a church, we are called to respond to the culture in which we find ourselves. We would do well to heed the "signs of the times in which we live."⁴

Institutions in Question

Our culture is putting into question the validity and usefulness of virtually every institution. The institution of marriage is being questioned and debated in the House of Commons; the instituted penal system is under constant pressure to undergo certain reforms; and abuse victims are challenging the institution of the Catholic Church in the court systems across North America. There is a growing scepticism that hovers over and around the many institutions of our culture-in-transition.

The case could be made that the institutions of our current North American culture have their roots in western European modernity—a period in history that extends from roughly 1500A.D. straight on through to the twentieth century. The modern period saw the rise of scientific inquiry, analytical schools of philosophy and the Industrial revolution, as well as the

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

development of the Protestant church.

In a book entitled, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, Brian D. McLaren, in a self-admitted gross oversimplification, outlines a number of characteristics about this period in history. Here's a summary of some of his observations:

1. Modernity was an era of conquest and control. From the first explorer to the nineteenth century scientist, there was an emphasis on the conquest of lands, peoples, religions and diseases. And tied into any conquest is a desire to control not only the people you have conquered, but also the experiments that you have set up, the economic systems that you have put in place and the profit margins you hope to maintain. Control was central to the modernist worldview.
2. Modernity was also the age of the machine. The Industrial Revolution was a period in history that highlighted the mechanization of society, the workplace and the home. Progress was marked by impersonal, technological advance. The mechanization was, in part, a further attempt to control variables normally beyond our control, particularly that of efficiency.
3. Modernity was a period of critical analysis as well. Knowledge or reason was heralded as that which would render the entire universe knowable and controllable. In such an age, there was little room for disagreement or diversity, never mind religion. "If you believe that you absolutely, objectively know the absolute, objective truth, and you know this with absolute certainty, then of course you must debunk anyone who sees differently from you."⁵ Debates and discussions were at the heart of critical interaction; dialogues *with* others were all but impossible.
4. Modernity was an age that saw the development of the modern nation-state and the drive to further societal organization. There was a push to control certain political and societal variables by way of well-organized systems with various interconnected structures. From political parties to picket lines, from penal systems to marriage vows, there was a push to create organizations and structures whose purpose it would be to further societal interests.
5. As part of that development, modernity witnessed the extension of institutionalized religion. It too became an organized system with various interconnected structures, all put in place to make sure no one fell through the cracks. From denominations to denominational seminaries, from church councils to ministry boards, systems were put in place to organize and control various cultural and congregational influences.

As an aside, Brian McLaren is the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Washington-Baltimore area. He is also the author of *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* and has worked extensively with the emerging church movement, attempting to discern the connection between the church and our postmodern climate. His level of discernment, willingness to question and desire to talk theology instead of church growth formulas have placed him on my (and many other's) unofficial "Must Read" list.

In looking closely at the modernist tendencies that McLaren lays out, the case could be made that our modern-day institutions find their root in many, if not all, of these tendencies. An institution, by definition, is an organization or organizational structure whose purpose is to further public welfare, learning and interests. Institutions are constructed to control various outside factors by means of some sort of (almost) mechanistic structure. Government is set up, in

⁵ McLaren, Brian, *A New Kind of Christian*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

part, to control national and international affairs by means of a system of checks and balances, party policy and electoral votes. The penal system is set up, in part, to control deviant behaviour by means of an elaborate system of penal law and confinement.

Even the institution of marriage is largely a modernist institution, particularly in terms of the legal rights associated with the institution itself. In the back of many psalter hymnals, the purpose of marriage is stated as follows: We seek to honour the will of God for marriage, the concern of the Christian church for its well-being, and the interest of the state in the orderly development of society. Although the first purpose is scriptural, the other two, as far as I can tell, more closely reflect the institution as developed throughout modernity. This, of course, has implications for the current discussion revolving around same-sex marriages.

In the last fifty or so years, much of the emphasis on institutional development has come into question. Hetero- and homosexuals alike are questioning the institute of marriage. The notions of conquest and control are now considered oppressive and imperialistic. And the heralding of reason and scientific inquiry as the final solution has given way to an openness to the sacred that has been absent in academic circles for some time. Even postmodern philosopher, Jacques Derrida, has been writing articles and books on the messiah-yet-to-come, forgiveness and confession.

Our culture has become weary and skeptical of modernity's promise of progress and societal development. Painting with rather broad strokes, it's fair to say that diversity is celebrated today and absolute truths have been put into question. Structures that have been put into place to maintain orderly development, like marriage, are viewed as suspect, in as much as they attempt to control and manipulate the behaviour of others. Even church structures, from synods to administrative councils, have been put into question.

I hear and echo much of that skepticism myself. Structures that seek to control or limit access seem oppressive. Systems that are put in place to make sure no one slips through the cracks seem impersonal. And I don't claim to have any direct line to any absolute truth, if truth is defined as something rationally justified. I even worry about our own preoccupation in the Christian Reformed Church with structured and administrative ministries. Most churches have too many committees and not enough genuine interaction.

All this is not to say that we must do away with structures and systems or that we must discard institutionalized religion or the institution of marriage, for that matter. The work that lies ahead for us is not one of completely rebuilding our societal framework, but of transforming our modernist tendencies—tendencies that are not necessarily scriptural. I would suggest that we too must put into question the desire to control, even in the case of the orderly development of society. I would also suggest that we look closely at the motivating forces that are at work behind the scenes when the church puts in place yet another structure or system, be it a ministry board or joint synod.

We may need systems, structures and institutions, but they must never replace the spirit of accommodation and the personal relationships that God has called us to attend to. Embodiment of the Christian faith is far more important than the institutions within which that faith manifests itself. We need to concentrate our efforts on living out our faith, instead of drawing up yet another flowchart outlining ministerial responsibilities. We need to bend ourselves out of control, instead of being bent on control.

Such an undertaking implies a considerable risk. We may end up with ministries in the church that don't "answer" to anyone; we may have ministers in our midst who haven't walked the halls of a traditional seminary; we may witness a weakening of our much-loved institutions,

perhaps even that of marriage. But we may also be reflecting Christ's redemptive love more effectively in a world that has put into question much of modernity's treasures; we may also be on the verge of "instituting" a new kind of church.

Sojourning in These Waters

God isn't in the wasteland, nor is the church.

To a recent book, David F. Wells gave the title *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*.⁶ In it, he creates a caricature of our postmodern landscape.

The landscape is dark and dreary, filled with angst and a longing for meaning. He argues that the dreams of past generations have given way to a prevailing hopelessness; values and norms have been replaced with an "everything goes" attitude; and the reality of Truth has been tainted by worldviews that are personal and consumeristic in approach. The role of the church in this world of fading dreams, he argues, is to speak with a different voice, to "embody a fitting countercultural spirituality centered in a serious, worshipful recognition of the presence of God, an obedient submission to his Word, and a compassionate outworking of his grace in loving service of the stricken of this world."⁷

I couldn't agree more, but . . . I don't believe that God, or the church, is currently caught in some sort of crumbling wasteland. At the very least, I'd argue that our landscape is no less dreary than those that have preceded it. Postmodernity is no greater a challenge to the faith of God's people than modernity once was. It does, however, require a different response.

In *God in the Wasteland*, the point is made that, in our time, we have been witness to a loss of centre. Wells points out that we have transitioned from a world "in which God and his truth were accorded a central and often public place to one in which they have neither."⁸ Without an agreed upon centre or point of orientation, our world has become filled with competing interests, rival values, so many gods, religions and worldviews.

In an extension of this thought, I believe that it's fair to say that the criteria upon which a number of things have been traditionally determined have fallen by the wayside. It has become more difficult to decipher right from wrong, norms from deviance and truth from that which is not the truth. In the past, judgments of this kind were, to some degree, based on an assumed centre. Without that centre, our culture has opened itself to the difficulty of passing judgment and making decisions without any assured criteria. As a result, passing judgment on individuals or groups of individuals has become increasingly difficult, and we're now more open, as a society, to alternative lifestyles, choices and institutions.

For the most part, this is viewed as a negative consequence of the postmodern shift that marks a movement away from a particularly Judeo-Christian centre. A certain caricature of postmodernity results: The world is seen as dark and dreary, longing for meaning and fulfilment. David F. Wells paints his landscape portrait with similar strokes.

There's a danger, however, that's inherent to such a caricature. As noted earlier, it encourages one of two reactions: flight or frenzy. Both reactions have worked themselves into the life of the church today. As noted earlier, there are those who mourn the loss of a centre and who hide away in their own little circles, and there are also those who protest loudly and vehemently against the world as they see it. Both reactions do little to encourage fruitful

6 Wells, David F. *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

7 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

8 *Ibid.*, p.14.

dialogue.

Although I would agree that a lack of centre, within our current culture, poses a significant challenge to us as God's people, I'm not so sure that it's necessarily a bad thing. Judgment has been replaced, by and large, with the notion of accompaniment. There is an ever-increasing concern in our culture for those who are on the receiving end of passed judgments. Even in the church, certain doors have been opened to those who have gone through a divorce or a teenaged pregnancy; denominations have become less judgmental of each other; and our willingness to dialogue with others, including those from other religions, has increased.

In our surrounding communities and especially amongst today's youth, there is a growing desire to focus less on being right and more on being inclusive and accepting. This shift is evident in the tone of our politics, in our everyday language and in the relationships that have developed across traditional religious, ethnic and lifestyle boundaries.

There are some who mourn the loss of a centre. At times, I am one of them. God has called each and every one of us to live sanctified lives, to search out the Godlessness in other worldviews and to challenge inappropriate behaviour. I don't believe in a God who would have wanted us to refrain from passing judgment on the Nazi regime. I believe in a God who longs for us to challenge more fully the sin that has permeated our society.

At the same time, I also believe in a God who doesn't want us to be judgmental. In the sermon on the mount, Christ encourages us to spend less time critiquing others and more time looking at ourselves, our shortfalls and our misgivings.

As far as I can tell, the line between judgment and accompaniment is a difficult one to walk down. We must never lose sight of God as our beginning and the orientation of our spiralling existence, even if we live in a decentred culture. With God as our centre, there are certain judgments that must, and can, be made. That said, a spirit of judgment has been, in the past, pervasive in the church, at times even crippling. We have been, and often still are, quick to comment about those on the other side of the fence, even within our own church communities. We judge much quicker than we ought and ostracize more people than we should, all of which rings hollow in the ears of up-and-coming generations.

This shift is largely a matter of pastoral consequence. The church ought to be more concerned with accompanying others, dialoguing with them and walking with them as they approach their Lord, regardless of the decisions they've made, the lifestyle they have led or are still choosing to lead. Judgment ought not to disappear, but I do believe it needs to be kept in its proper place.

We need to spend less time bemoaning the loss of a centre and more time reaching out to those on the receiving end of our passed (past) judgments. We are called to bear witness to God as *our* centre not by bemoaning a loss of that centre or by proving others wrong, but by living in and through that centre—a centre that, in scripture, is equated with love (1 John 4).

Telling our Story

We live in a strange, story-telling world. Our world is threatening to destroy itself, with poverty and suicide bombers, by its own prosperity. It's a world that's seasick with motion, with airplanes traversing the skies and viruses working their way through the world-wide web. But despite the chaos, stories are still being told. There's a peculiarity to our particular period in history; there's something odd about our obsession with sound bytes and clipped images, with our best-sellers lists and our Hollywood blockbusters. We like to tell our stories.

Of note is the extent to which our society has, as of late, become a visual culture. Television programming runs non-stop, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Our movie theatres, as places of worship, are frequented more often than our sanctuaries. The attention span of the entire population is getting shorter. Our culture, despite the improvements in overall literacy, is increasingly visual in orientation, the flashing billboards in our downtown cores being a testament to this.

Even the material that would have been text-based in the past is being reworked for a visually stimulated, story-telling audience. The youth oriented Alpha program is a great example. The official course materials are not a simple series of scripture passages and questions. Instead, each page is a full-colour spread of quotes, pictures overlaid on top of other pictures, scripture passages and computer-generated images. One page is enough visual stimulation to make the eyes swirl (except that some of us have become quite accustomed to it).

One of the by-products of this visual bombardment is a growing desire to experience life, to live the story. We see images from around the world sent by satellites into our living rooms. We're no longer satisfied with local sights; we want to see the world, travel the skies and bathe in the Amazon. We're also no longer content playing video games or simply watching T.V.. Virtual reality is the new height of entertainment, and we're obsessed with reality television shows.

Phil Apol says of this cultural shift, "We can decry this, or realize the tremendous opportunity it presents us to introduce the gospel back into our culture, in ways reminiscent of the early church."⁹ The visual bombardment of our day presents itself as a challenge to the church, with so many differing worldviews being given expression and so many images flashing before our eyes. Can the church keep up? Should it?

To some extent, the church has already been making adjustments. The catechism classes of yesteryear are gone. The point-by-point, proposition-based explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism has been reworked. Three point sermons have all but vanished, and drama has been reintroduced into our worship experience.

⁹ Apol, Philip A. "Curiouser and Curiouser," (Unpublished), p. 6.

As Phil Apol notes, “We live in an increasingly visual culture, and our language and methods of outreach ideally should be tuned to, or at least aware of, the frequencies of 21st century society.”¹⁰ The church may not need to keep up, but it should, at the very least, be in tune with the frequencies of our day.

The dramatization of our faith will be crucial as the church continues to transition. It’s not that we need to transition away from instruction *per se*; we need to continue to teach, to guide, to instruct each other in the life that God has called us to lead. Preaching God’s Word, teaching the doctrines of the church, reintroducing the basics of the faith are absolutely vital components of being the church of Christ. We do, however, need to explore alternate and new ways of presenting our faith and the mystery of grace.

In our worship services, we are called to worship our Lord and to tell the story of redemption and restoration. Theological propositions only go so far. The story is filled with dramatic events (like the flood), poetic expressions (as in the Psalms), moments of lament (for Job and others) and songs of love. Not only do we need to concentrate our efforts on telling that story as a dramatic unfolding of God’s plan, we also need to present God’s story in a way that speaks to the next generation. Although we don’t need (and we may not even want) church services to look like the current Alpha for Youth material, we do need to continue to incorporate art, poetry, fiction, sculpture and dance into our services.

In the same vein, sermons ought to be a running commentary on the living out of our faith today, in today’s world. We should be making more use of visual and auditory stimulation, showing clips from Simpson’s episodes, listening to Radiohead songs, slipping in a lyric or two, telling real-life stories that reflect our current state of broken-ness and God’s gift of grace.

Perhaps most importantly, our faith needs to be given dramatic expression in our everyday life. As noted earlier, there’s an ever-increasing demand to experience something for oneself. There’s a reason our broader culture highlights service opportunities as it does; our youth are longing to experience life firsthand. If we want to minister to those searching, we need to spend less time inviting them into our midst and seeking a commitment of some sort, and we need to spend more time meeting them on their terms. The members of Christ’s church should be inviting neighbours over for dinner, talking to strangers at Tim Horton’s, conversing with those from other faith perspectives, serving at Out of the Cold.

If we want to be responsive to an ever-changing world, we need to tune ourselves into the frequencies of the day. We need to be in touch with what’s on T.V., on the radio and on the web, without simply absorbing it. We also need to present our faith not as a series of propositions, but as a journey, a dramatic story, that is yet unfolding before our eyes. That story is visually stimulating, full of sounds and smells, something that we experience first hand; it’s God’s story finding expression in our lives.

It’s time to concentrate less on instruction and more on the dramatization of our faith; it’s time to share the story of creation, fall, redemption and consummation; it’s time to share our personal response to that story. The time has come for us to be less judgmental of each other; it’s time for us to concentrate our efforts on being there for one another, accompanying each other along the way; and the time has also come for us to re-evaluate how little space we give to the physical, bodily expressions of our faith, whether it be in the form of ashes on our foreheads or serving hands at Out of the Cold. At the very least, we have to resist the temptation to hide

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6.

away in our own little community or apathetically absorb what our culture has to offer. Let's tell our story, walk with one another and give bodily expression to our faith.