

## **Culture: Around, Against, In the Church's Worship**

Marva J. Dawn

### *The Crux of the Issue*

Two weeks ago a Canadian Broadcasting producer in Montreal telephoned me. She had heard of my book, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, from a few pastors and wanted to know the main points of my approach, because she was preparing a program for Easter to focus on what congregations could do to attract Canadians to worship.<sup>1</sup> Whereas one generation ago, two out of three in Canada participated in worship, now the ratio is at most one out of three, and even less in British Columbia and Quebec. The producer and I talked about idolatries, about wrong turns that churches are making, about confusions, about what questions we should be asking. She kept affirming what I was saying. "That is really a good point," she would say, or "I see why you say that" or "That makes a lot of sense." As a result I was totally surprised when she suddenly said, "And what would you tell churches to do about people like me? I never go to church." She compared herself to the typical middle-aged, disinterested defector from worship and asked how churches should attract her. How would you have responded?

The key question that I think we need to be asking in these days is what we should tell churches to do about such people as this Canadian producer. The real issue is—in our culture which is less and less Christian, which is post-Christian, sometimes anti-Christian—what does it mean to be the church when we worship?

### *Questions We Must Ask of What Some Are Saying*

Let's consider first what many congregations are saying in response to the question of this Canadian producer. As a representative conversation partner I will use a review in *Worship Innovations* by David Luecke of my book *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*. Referring to my endorsement of Kenneth Myer's distinction between gourmet food,

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<sup>1</sup>Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

traditional home cooking, and fast food as examples of high, folk, or pop culture, Luecke says,

The assumption is that most people would prefer gourmet food if they could get it. That's questionable. It can be hard to digest and the cost in time or money is usually too high.... Home cooking in general seems to be disappearing. That leaves Burger King. The whole worship discussion could be reframed around two alternatives: If you and your congregation had to choose between being a fancy French restaurant or a Burger King, which would you prefer?... Most advocates of contemporary worship, including me, would opt for Burger King; in a given week it feeds a lot more people, and the food meets the needs.... Which kind of food service do you think Jesus and Paul would choose?<sup>2</sup>

My purpose here today is to ask questions. That makes it easy for me, because the other speakers have to give the answers. Perhaps we should ask several sets of questions about Luecke's comments. To get us thinking about how we would respond to the Canadian broadcaster, the principal question must be, "What should the church be?" Our next questions, however, have to circle around the common answers illustrated by Luecke's review. What kinds of questions should we be asking of his response. Here are seven sets of queries I would like to pose:

1. Isn't the gospel sometimes hard to digest?

2. Doesn't discipleship cost a lot in time and money?

3. Which kind of food service did Jesus choose? Jewish Temple, synagogue, festivals and feasts of Judaica—these sound like home cooking and gourmet food to me. And what kind of "food service" does Paul mean when he urges, "seek the things which are above"? How will our worship give us a foretaste of the feast to come? It is somewhat like my wearing a flowered jacket today when spring hasn't hit Indiana yet. I am an ambassador from another state, where the flowers are blooming in full profusion. Our worship is to give a foretaste of the feast to come; how will our worship give a vision of the heavenly kingdom? It seems we need gourmet cooking for that.

4. And then we have to ask why home cooking is disappearing. Are the traditions that link us to the faith no longer important? Why have we lost the traditions that link us to people of faith throughout time and space?

5. Which need does Burger King food meet—the need for speed? If our worship is like Burger King, how will we form the habits and

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<sup>2</sup>David Luecke, Review of *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down in Worship Innovations* 2/1 (Winter 1997): 26.

practices, the customs and the manners of being the people of God?<sup>3</sup> If our worship is like Burger King, how will we teach meditation, silence, reflection, depth, memorization, conversation, intimacy, continuity, community, lament, cross-bearing, truth, beauty, and goodness? Will we learn those if our worship is like Burger King?

6. I'm not advocating one French gourmet restaurant. I am advocating a plethora of them. I would hope that we would sing Hispanic as well as soul music, songs from Madagascar as well as Norway, from South Africa and Russia, from the fourth century as well as the sixteenth and the twentieth. Will we learn diversity at Burger King?

7. No matter which kind of food service we are talking about, we must ask whether it meets our genuine needs. What is good for us? What will really contribute to growth in faith? As we eat, are we growing stronger or just fatter?

Of course, the food analogy breaks down, and we get in trouble if we stretch it too far. But isn't it a severe theological problem to say that our worship should be like Burger King because other food is hard to digest and costs too much in time and money? It seems to me that then we are talking merely about marketing and entertainment, instead of talking about worship, formation for discipleship, and liturgy (which means "the work of the people").

My basic second point, then, is to note that it is the wrong question if we ask how to appeal to people. Then what is the main question? The various denominational bodies represented at this conference are not failing for lack of appealing or "contemporary" worship—all worship is contemporary because we are doing it now—but our churches are failing for lack of theological questioning. I am not an elitist about worship style (though some critics misread my book so), but I am elitist about what it means to be a Christian, about how people are formed by the narratives of the scriptures to follow Christ. I am elitist about pursuing the way of discipleship, which costs us time and money and sometimes is very hard to digest.

### *To Be Christians against the Culture*

The major question has to be "What does it mean to be Christian—and Christians at worship?" We must take some cues from George Lindbeck and other theorists of the postliberal (Yale) school. Lindbeck proclaims a

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<sup>3</sup>See Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

keen insight by emphasizing that Christianity is not simply cognitive, not simply intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal propositions, nor is it merely experiential, to have uplifting religious experiences. Rather, Christianity is a cultural-linguistic system, by which we learn the language of faith.<sup>4</sup>

This is enormously helpful in the face of postmodernism: that the church can teach people the language, the habits, the practices of Christianity, so that people are formed by the canonical texts of scripture which are at the heart of the language of faith. The rules of doctrine are the grammar, to guide our first order speech of worship and life, so that we know how to converse as a people in this culture. If worship is planned simply to entertain or appeal, will we be immersed in the language of faith? Especially if the main idioms of the language are scriptural and we want our lives to be formed by the biblical narratives, can we conform ourselves too much to the language of the world around us?

To answer the major question, we must ask many things about being Christian and about being at worship. What does it mean, as followers of Christ, to worship?

My husband, who teaches fifth grade, despairs over the children in his classroom, many of whom are unable to read, to think, to care, to learn. We were thrilled recently with the winter 1996-97 issue of *American Educator* from the American Federation of Teachers, which featured a set of articles on the new Core Knowledge Schools and how these new schools are increasing the level of achievement, especially among disadvantaged children. These schools (of which there are now about 350 in forty states) are focusing particularly on detailed, deep, substantial content. The *American Educator* articles explore problems with schools in the United States these days and acknowledge that in most cases students are not interested because the material is vacuous, boring, or self-absorbed. Compare this social studies lesson:

Needs are things people must have to live. We all need food to eat. We need clothes to wear. We need shelter... We also need love and friendship. Needs are the same for everyone all over the world.

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<sup>4</sup>See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). See also Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Wants are important too. Wants are things we would like to have. Different people have different wants. What do you want?<sup>5</sup>

Do you find that lesson interesting? The students don't either. They want particulars. They want to learn about the people in Egypt and how they buried the mummies. This winter issue of *American Educator* detailed some of the stimulating things that children were learning in Core Knowledge schools. Researchers from John Hopkins University and the University of Memphis are discovering in a multi-year evaluation of the schools that the program lessens the need for re-teaching, that students are more interested in learning and have a higher attendance average, that teachers are invigorated, and that disadvantaged students are closing the gap between their achievements and that of higher-income students.<sup>6</sup>

The same is true especially of Christianity's worship. How dangerous it is if we evacuate our worship of substantive content! Then we have to increase the hype constantly in order to get people to pay attention. In contrast, if worship is rich and deep—with a large range of sounds and images and biblical details—it is invigorating to both participants and leaders.

In her wonderful book *Hearts and Hands and Voices: Growing in Faith Through Choral Music*, Sue Ellen Page, who directs nine choirs in Princeton, including one for inner-city children, says this: "What we do must be effective, challenging, memorable, and distinctive."<sup>7</sup> That is a great list of what our worship involves. We must practice the language of faith with content.

#### *To Be Christians for the Neighbor*

Correlatively, we must ask, as followers of Christ, what it means to reach out to our neighbor—in caring and evangelism. What grieves me ponderously as I travel around the United States is this terrible confusion between evangelism and worship, to the profound detriment of both. I have read the Bible through many times, and I have never found a passage

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<sup>5</sup>Editor, "Core Knowledge Schools Take Root Across the Country," *American Educator*, 20, 4 (Winter, 1996-97): 4.

<sup>6</sup>Editor, "Test Scores Rise, Enthusiasm Abounds," *American Educator*, 20, 4 (Winter, 1996-97): 21.

<sup>7</sup>Sue Ellen Page, *Hearts and Hands and Voices: Growing in Faith Through Choral Music* (Tarzana, CA: H.T. FitzSimons Company, 1995), 112.

which says, “Worship the Lord to attract the unbeliever.” Instead, Scripture says again and again that we worship the Lord because God is worthy of our praise. Worship, therefore, is directed towards God, not towards the neighbor. Now don’t get this wrong—good worship will be evangelistic, but we must not confuse the two.

I’ve discovered a wonderful way to illustrate the difference. I will show you this eight by ten inch picture of my husband, to whom I’ve been married for three days less than ninety-four months. I can tell you all about Myron—what a wonderful teacher he is, what a magnificent gardener (and the flowers are blooming in Washington), how handsome he is, and how he has taken care of me through my non-stop health problems—and all that would be in the idiom of introduction. But is that how I will talk to him when I go home, after I have been away for this institute, a meeting at Princeton about worship, and a conference for the New Jersey Synod? How will I talk with him after I have been away for a week? It will be the language of love, of intimacy, and of growth. He will tell me what he has done this week; I will tell him about you, the wonderful people I have been with; we will grow together by working through some problems. Worship is the language of love and growth; evangelism is the language of introduction. To confuse the two, to put on worship the burden of evangelism robs the people of God of their responsibility to care about the neighbor and robs God of the praise of which he is worthy.

I have been a co-speaker a few times with a person who says, “Every congregation must have at least two styles of worship, two points of entry into the congregation.” Wrong! Worship is not the entry point; you are! I want 490 points of entry into the congregation if there are 490 members. If we confuse this, not every person in the pews recognizes that she or he is a vital part of the Christian community and its outreach to the world around us. What is the difference between evangelism and worship? They go in opposite directions. How and when will we equip the people for both? It requires great catechumenal training. I think one of the reasons that our churches are in such severe trouble is that we have failed for fifty years to educate people to be witnesses, to care for their neighbors, to minister to the world around them as active parts of the body of Christ—and we have failed for fifty years to teach people what worship is.

Also, we have to recognize that this confusion between evangelism and worship is driven by the church marketers, so one major question that we always have to ask is whether the marketing gurus are biblically faithful. Let me direct your attention to an extraordinarily helpful book by Philip

Kenneson and James Street called *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing*.<sup>8</sup> I highly recommend that you read this excellent exposé of the problems with the unbiblical advice of church marketers, so that we can all be aware of the false notions that are being propagated in our churches.

### *The Culture around the Church*

We must next ask a crucial set of questions about the kind of culture in which we live. My book *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* talks primarily about the television, boomer culture, so we need not spend much time on those dimensions here. What else characterizes the culture that surrounds us?

Midge Decter, in her 1995 Erasmus Lecture, said that the two main questions these days are “So what?” and “Why not?” These are highly indicative of the kind of nihilism (“So what?”) and arrogance (“Why not?”) that have issued in moral paralysis in our country. We have to recognize that these ideas that nothing matters or that anything goes as long as I choose it leave a lot of people in great despair, leave them without a home, without any sort of trust, or without what Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes calls “adhesion.” Our society no longer possesses those fibers of basic trust that hold society together as a community.

Benjamin R. Barber, director of the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University, evaluates our society as Jihad vs. McWorld. He critiques the “virtual economy” of images, the escalating world “monoculture,” the ideology of fun at the expense of social institutions and folkways. Manipulated by “promotion, spin, packaging, and advertising,” citizens lose all interest in public matters and become passive consumers who devote themselves exclusively to the satisfaction of their multiplying wants. In such a culture, what happens if our worship fosters consumerism? This is a critical question we must ask. What are the true needs of people in a McWorld or Jihad culture, in a “Why not?” and “So what?” society? The brevity of my time here prevents me from highlighting other aspects, such as the economic disparity and injustice of our world, its depleted infrastructure in every part of common life, its cultural recession and conflict, its moral chaos, its increasing bitterness and decline of civility, the levels of infant mortality

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<sup>8</sup>Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street, *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

and child poverty and inadequate schooling that put the U.S. at the bottom among industrial nations, the lack of a future for young people.

### *The Postmodern Condition*

The one area that I wish I had explored more deeply in *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* is the aspect of postmodernism. Truly, the needs of those in the postmodern condition must be considered if we want the church's worship to care for people in our culture.

Let us envision the world's progression from pre-modernism through modernism to postmodernism, and in each of those eras we will trace the movement of three dimensions so that we can see what really is happening to our world. I think it is essential that, as leaders in the church, you and I know all that we can about what drives the despair and nihilism in our culture so that we can genuinely minister to the needs of that world.

If you look at the pre-modern world—and we have to recognize how universally this pertained—there always was a god. In every culture, no matter where you were in the world, there was a god. And there were authorities—that is the second category we will trace—who told the lay people what that god was like and helped the people know how to please that god. What the authorities passed on, therefore, was truth; and that is the third category to trace. Let's recognize how every culture in the world accentuated these three categories in the pre-modern world. Every culture had a god, and every culture had authorities, witch doctors, voodooists, priests, and shamans, who told the lay people what truth was and how to please those gods.

This all broke down with the Enlightenment, when, for the first time in the history of the world—what a mammoth change that was—the focus of life became not the supernatural but the natural, what we could prove and discover through science, the progress human beings could make, and the process of technological development. Of course, there is nothing wrong with science—the first scientists were usually Christians—but science more and more began to displace the supernatural, especially for those people who had only had a god of the gaps in the first place. Then one needs less and less of god because science is filling in more and more of the gaps. Instead of authorities to pass on the truth, the modern world accentuated autonomy—every person for his or her own self. And truth became relative, so that people could say, “Well, Christianity might be true for you, but it is not true for me.”

In this modern world we built somewhat of a tower of Babel founded on science, which gave us the knowledge and insight, multiplied by technology, which gave us the power, and funded by economics, which would give us the wealth to solve all the problems in the world. Or so the great myth of progress said.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, this tower had to break down because nobody had any control over who had the power, and instead of progress the twentieth century gave us World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Watergate, all the other-gates, and many other crises in our social order. What we must see is that postmodernism was inevitable because the myth of progress is simply false and thereby must become disillusioning. I belong to an African-American congregation in Portland, Oregon, and my sisters and brothers there learned postmodernism long ago, for the myth of progress never included some of the marginalized people in our culture.

Now as we trace our three dimensions in postmodernism, what we get instead of the supernatural, which was replaced by the natural in modernism, is deconstruction. In this aspect, postmodernism is very helpful, for many of the myths of modernity, such as the myth of progress, ought to be deconstructed. We Christians ought never to have bought into it in the first place, since the Bible told us long ago that human beings are sinful and will never get better and better.

Instead of autonomy, postmodernism leads to de-centering. Because postmodernism, more than simply the work of esoteric philosophers, has hit the streets, the schools, our homes, and especially our children, this problem of de-centering is important for our purposes here. Many kids don't know who they are. I find it fascinating to talk with teenagers who change themselves every other day in conformity with the newest fads, because they don't have a core "web of reality" by which to understand themselves on a deeper level. They have never learned a coherent language. This is why the cultural-linguistic understanding of Christianity is so helpful: because the language of faith is an idiom that gives coherence to our lives. It helps us know who we are, or, as Robert Jenson says, it gives us our story.

For the third dimension, instead of truth and the relativity of truth in modernity, postmodernity demonstrates the absolutizing of relativity, so that there is no truth, except for what individuals create for themselves.

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<sup>9</sup>See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

Postmodern philosophers use words like random and playfulness, but what that comes down to for our children is chaos and confusion.<sup>10</sup>

In such a world, what are the needs that the church should be addressing? And what should the church's worship be in such a culture, where people long for the supernatural, some sort of authority, a way to focus reality and dispel myths, some kind of center and ordering? How will we respond to the despair, the hopelessness and homelessness, the extreme fracturing and overwhelming choices of each person creating his or her own world? Will we simply entertain people so that they don't have to face themselves or their lives? Will we seize the immense opportunity of our culture's searching, its lack of any basis for knowledge? Or will we be afraid of our own identity as the church and offer entertainment instead of catechetical formation?

When I see the despair and hopelessness of postmodern young people, it fills me with enormous pain and a burden to bring them a point of reference. I always test out my theology on airplanes, where I find an enormous number of people sitting next to me who have no idea what kind of goals to have in life. I meet lots of people in their twenties and thirties who care only about the next rock concert or esoteric concert for which they will fly halfway across the country, or, out where I live, only about their next ski trip. When I try to converse with such people, there is no ability to contemplate any of the deep, foundational questions such as "Who am I?" and "Why do I exist?" and "What is the problem with the world?" and "What can fix it?" Those are the four basic existential questions for which Christianity gives wonderful answers.

### *Wrong Turns in Modernity and Postmodernity*

If this is the kind of culture we are in—postmodern, McWorld, and so forth—what are some of the wrong turns that churches have made? No doubt you could make a long list, but let me highlight six of them, since that is the biblical number for sin.

<sup>10</sup>For further study of postmodernism, see Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation, and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995); John O'Neill, *The Poverty of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1995); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, editors, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (InterVarsity Press, 1995); Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

First of all, many churches are giving less truth instead of more, sacrificing content for form, turning merely to entertainment. No wonder people are bored with “church.” The preachers are bored. When you are speaking for something, don’t you find yourself much more interested if you have too much to say? If we recognize that Christianity always has too much to say—as the gospel lesson said last week, “Jesus did many other signs which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you might believe” (John 20:30)—then we perceive that we have to give more content and not less, especially with the biblical illiteracy that characterizes the United States and, truth to tell, the Lutheran church.

Second—and you will notice that these six wrong turns alternate between mistakes of liberals and conservatives or whatever labels we might apply, so you don’t think I am picking on any certain denomination or group—we blunder if we blur the identity of Christianity in a false reaction to pluralism. This is to be ashamed of the gospel and the scandal of our particularity—to say that it doesn’t really matter if you are a Christian, as long as you are sincere. That would be the same as if on Saturday in Philadelphia I would get on any airplane and hope that I wind up in Portland, Oregon, as long as I’m sincere. Now it is true that in a pluralistic society, Christians err if they are imperialistic about their particularity, coercive instead of hospitable and inviting, but our faith is in a God of good news, and the truth of grace in Christ remains unique and is uniquely to be shared.

A third wrong turn is to minister only to “felt needs” instead of providing what is truly needful. Jesus gives us a lot of commentary on that issue, and I have already said enough in my responses to David Luecke’s review.

A fourth mistake in a rootless society is to give up our heritage. These days people are scrambling to know where they belong. An apt illustration is the movie shown on the airplane yesterday. I didn’t watch it but read the description in the airline’s magazine. The summary said that a single mother who is an architect meets an every-other-weekend dad who is a journalist, and all they have in common is the same kind of cellular phone. How will they fall in love? What a terrible commentary on our society if we look at this story from their offsprings’ perspective. Those children have been cut off from the completion of the story line of their original two parents, and is a cellular phone enough to heal the rupture? There is a boy in my husband’s class who has multiple parents—his mother has been married several times and his father more than once. How can this child know who he is? In the face of such discontinuity and abandonment, to

give up the roots of our faith, which goes all the way back to Abraham, is a very dangerous thing to do. We thereby give up our ties to our forebears in the Jewish and Christian heritage, our history of God's interventions, and our connections to the global community of believers.

Fifth, in a society with less moral authority, churches lapse when they give up on that which is clear in the scriptures, when they become so tolerant that members of the community are no longer formed by the biblical narratives. In the name of a false compassion, genuine love is replaced with conformity to an unmoored society.

Finally, number six and one of the worst is to think that the church is a democracy. To imagine that the body is characterized by choice leads us into bitter battles over taste. The problem with taste is deciding which taste to follow. Research shows that people in the United States are quite evenly divided between those who prefer hard rock, soft rock, classical, jazz, blues, country and western, contemporary schmaltz or easy listening, and several other kinds. Which idiom should we choose? In *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* I cite Thomas Gieschen's list of ten kinds of contemporary church music. Also, since Christianity is a different language altogether, what language should we use to capture its grammar?

Let's think for a moment about how dangerous it is to turn the church into a battlefield over taste. It fosters the "vendors-consumer" notion of marketing religion. Often congregations divide the body into a "traditional" and a "contemporary" service, which is enormously disruptive to the community. It usually splits the older people from the younger, and the latter don't share in the wisdom of the former, while the older people don't participate in the vitality of the younger. Even more damaging, the "contemporaryists" lose their roots and don't learn anything older than five years, and the "traditionalists" don't know anything fresh and lack the vitality of reformation and renewal. The result is that we ignore the fact that God has widely eclectic tastes—and it is God we are worshiping and not ourselves. Furthermore, it is important to sing songs I don't like for the sake of the community.

### *Tools of the Culture in the Worship of the Alternative Community*

In this penultimate section, we must ask critical questions about the formation of genuine Christian community. Caring about the culture that is around the church, knowing that the church is an alternative community often against the surrounding culture, and recognizing that elements of the culture provide tools for use in the church's worship, what forms can we

employ, and what questions can guide our choices? In *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* I focus on the following three criteria for all our choices.

First of all, what kind of God do we have, and what tools will be faithful to who God is? During the year that I had cancer, I found it impossible to worship in places that sang only happy songs (rather than genuine praise songs that focus on the character and interventions of God). Mere happiness is not congruent with the disequilibrium of our lives, nor is it faithful to God either—our suffering God.

Secondly, what kind of persons are we forming? David Luecke in his review says that I am elitist about head knowledge, whereas everyone should worship with the heart, but this comment misunderstands what scripture passages about praising God with our whole heart mean. The biblical word *heart* signifies the will, not the emotions—that we can worship God intentionally even when we don't feel like it, since God is worthy of our adoration. Joseph Sittler memorably said, "Is the great catholic faith of nineteen centuries to be reduced to my interior dimensions?" Is worship forming us instead to be part of the whole catholic host of people who care about the world around us and reach out to it in witness? Worship is not about feeling good; it is about becoming good.

Finally, how is our worship equipping us to be genuine community, a people who deeply care about each other, who bring diversity into unity, and who reach out to the world around us? Let me hold up as a model the African-American congregation to which I belong. One Sunday we began with a contemporary chorus that was theologically substantive, and also during that day's worship we sang "We Are Marching in the Light of God" from South Africa, a Taizé refrain, a Lutheran chorale, a Wesleyan pietistic song, and a soulfully-sung African spiritual. Such diversity helps to form an inclusive community!

For choosing our worship elements, we must especially ask questions concerning propriety. Barbara Resch's doctoral research showed that teenagers give very different answers when asked "What is appropriate for worship?" rather than "What do you want?" Consider these subtopics concerning propriety:

What is appropriate for displaying the character and interventions of God?

What is appropriate for forming the character of the followers of Christ?

What is appropriate for developing a sense of the church catholic?  
What is appropriate for the level of the congregation's ability to participate?  
What is appropriate for this place in the worship service?  
What is appropriate for the texts of the day?  
What is appropriate for this time in the church year?  
What is appropriate for the level of pain in the world?  
What is appropriate for envisioning the kingdom of God with all its truth, beauty, and goodness?

We must ask such questions of propriety about our music, our liturgy, our prayers, our sermons.<sup>11</sup>

*The Church's Worship: Against, in, and for the Sake of the Culture around Us*

How does our worship immerse us in the language of the parallel, alternative society of the church, the church catholic? *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* especially highlights the notion of the alternative society, but here let me add the concept of the "parallel," which I learned from Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic. He was asked why the revolution of Czechoslovakia was a "velvet" one—that is, non-violent—and he said something like this: "We had our parallel society. And in that parallel society we wrote our plays [he himself is a playwright] and sang our songs and read our poems until we knew the truth so well that we could go out to the streets of Prague and say, 'We don't believe your lies anymore'—and communism had to fall."

It is a marvelous picture of the Christian Church. We gather together to speak our language, to read our narratives of God at work, to sing the hymns of the faith in whatever style, to chant and to pour out our prayers until we know the truth so well that we go out into the world around us and invite that world to share this truth with us.

Sociologists recognize that any alternative way of life that is substantively different from the larger society around it and that wants to maintain itself needs rituals, institutions, procedures, practices, and a language that uphold and nurture its vision of how it is different and why

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<sup>11</sup>One good new resource that I would like to highlight is Hughes Oliphant Old's *Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Worship/Ministers* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995). This book includes wonderful invocations and prayers that draw on the entire tradition of the church, both old and new.

that matters. Are we as Christians committed to the alternative way of life described in the scriptures and incarnated in Christ, so that we are willing to invest ourselves diligently in order to transmit this valued way of life to our children and neighbors?

Perhaps you know the name Bernice Johnson Reagon, who is a founder of the singing group “Sweet Honey in the Rock,” a gifted a cappella ensemble doing mostly African-American traditions; these singers are especially good at evoking audience involvement. One of the members of the group performed in the inner city of Portland, and it was a stunning experience to sit in the middle of the powerful participation by everyone in exquisite and soaring sound. In an interview with *The Other Side* magazine, Bernice responded to a question about her “born again” experience by noting that it is different in the African-American tradition. There you are asked by the elders if you have been given a sign. She said, “When this time came in your life, you didn’t eat or drink. You fasted and prayed. When the sign came, it was a powerful experience for you and a real point of celebration for the whole community.” Notice that this is a community affair. Reagon continues, “I became a member of the church and a Christian. After that, I didn’t act the same. I was less frivolous in the way I conducted myself. I can also remember thinking that if I was really a Christian, I had to learn to sing more difficult songs ...”<sup>12</sup>

Reagon emphasizes that “the community is healthiest when it sings. Singing is the process of creating a communal voice ... Singing together expresses the community on a level that goes beyond anything you hear, see, or say.” When she is giving a concert and is working to get everyone to sing, she wants everyone to feel that there isn’t a choice. “I think I make people feel that if they don’t sing they are going to die.” That is the great possibility—and the challenge for our worship as people in our culture become more and more passive and thereby neglect the essence of liturgy. Reagon declares, “I build a space that makes people feel very bad if they decide they don’t want to sing... It’s a way of giving credit to the African-American congregational tradition, which means you pass the audition when you walk in the door.”<sup>13</sup> On her “Good News” album, she confesses these words from a traditional African-American song: “It was good news

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<sup>12</sup>Bernice Johnson Reagon, “*The Other Side’s* Faces of Faith: A Collection of Our Favorite Interviews [pamphlet],” interview by Sharon Anderson (Philadelphia: *The Other Side*, n.d.), 9.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

to lay down the world and shoulder the cross of Jesus. It's not a good time, but it is good news."<sup>14</sup>

Are our congregations conducting worship that is deep enough to equip people to lay down the world's follies and shoulder the cross, or do we simply seek a good time? Does our worship equip us to be hospitable, compassionate, seeking peace and justice in the world? Does our worship provide an encounter with the Lord of the cosmos who is friend to sinners and thereby strengthen us to be friends with our neighbors?

Let's return to that Canadian Broadcasting producer who asked, "What will you tell churches to do about me? I don't go to church." I replied, "First of all, I would like to be your friend," and she reacted with stunned silence. I told her that from our conversation I could tell we probably had a lot in common, that we could become great friends. "We would have wonderful, probing conversations," I said, "and invariably the discussion would get around to Jesus Christ, because he is the center of my life." And then she broke in, "And your life would show me that faith makes a difference." "Yes, I hope so," I responded. "Would you like to come with me to worship?"

Let us pray. The translation of John 8 that follows comes from Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement: Lord Jesus, set us apart in your truth. Enable us to abide in it so that we can truly be your disciples, so that we will truly know the truth—and that truth will make us odd. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 10.