

Liturgy vs. Contemporary Worship

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

Is worship manmade or God-directed?

This is a hugely important question. If worship is truly manmade, then the questions become: Which men are going to come up with a worship form? On what basis – by what authority – will they make the decisions they do? To what extent is anyone else obligated to accept what they come up with? If worship is manmade, obviously, there will be a lot of variance in worship. Worship will boil down to individual style.

Our instinct is to say worship shouldn't be manmade, yet one of the complaints leveled at the liturgy is that, in fact, that is what it is, just man's traditions. Against this tradition of man, advocates of contemporary worship will fall into two camps, some saying their worship is "true biblical worship," and others saying, because it's manmade, we should be smart how we do it by doing market analysis, cultural studies, and using other business tools to craft a worship service that fits the community its trying to reach. If the former camp is taken, then the question becomes a debate over Scripture: What exactly is the true biblical worship? If the latter camp is taken, then the question becomes a debate over technique: What is the most effective approach to "meet the needs" of the people?

If worship is God-directed, this brings a bit more certainty. We would hope so important an activity as worship of God would be directed by Him. In fact, in the Old Testament a significant portion of the Torah was dedicated to how we should worship the Lord (especially the books of Exodus and Leviticus).

Answering this question brings up other issues, like the role of the Bible, or apostolic authority. Did the apostles establish Christian worship? Or was it up to individual pastors or congregations? Or was there complete chaos until, after 60 years, the Holy Spirit assembled the New Testament as a guide for worship? That last question is facetious, because obviously the Holy Spirit guided the Church prior to the New Testament being completed. That being the case, what from that time period carries on as authoritative? (In fact, this is why historic churches hold to the Apostles' Creed, the liturgy, and the traditional canon of Scripture, because they – implicitly or explicitly – "hold to the traditions" (II Thess. 2: 15) as handed on from the apostles. The idea that there was no church, no real guidance, no authority prior to the New Testament being completed is ridiculous.)

OR, maybe the authority in the church before the New Testament's completion was as the Pentecostals say, that the Holy Spirit immediately inspired prophets and teachers to guide the congregations, so, one church here might adopt this kind of worship by the Spirit's guidance, and one church there might do another kind of worship by the Spirit's guidance. If this is the case, how would this carry on today? Obviously it would suggest that worship should be guided by modern "prophets," by leaders in the Church who have been given special endowments and gifts by the Holy Spirit to guide the Church's worship. If this is the case, then we have to take seriously the claim that the 1960s was a time of "great paradigm change" or "an outpouring of the Holy Spirit" or "a latter day rain" when the old forms of worship, sacrament, rituals, and dogmas was replaced by new ways of worship, the centrality of music, free form worship, and de-emphasis on dogmas in favor of "deeds."

That all being stated, if the latter, Pentecostalist, approach is taken, we should at least admit the inherently Gnostic character of this attitude, namely, that God deals with us outside the formal properties of His Son, the apostolic witness, the Word, and the Sacraments. It would be like a Latin student of mine once said, when I was making a case for a theological point based on the perfect tense of a verb, "God is bigger than the perfect tense." That is true, but the historic Christian confession was that God bound Himself to forms – like the form of a man, the forms of language, the forms of physical things (a burning bush, a donkey, the Jordan River, baptism, Lord's Supper) – because we ourselves are formal, that is, we have forms.

And in fact, as we investigate the roots of this ultimately New Age understanding of God – that God communicates with us at a very personal level, in our hearts – we find it goes back to an innovative, revolutionary understanding of God, where the Trinity is defined as God coming in three modes: the age of the Law, the age of the Church, and now a “new age” of the Holy Spirit. Georg Hegel picked up on the idea and believed in a Spirit of History guiding the world through the unconscious actions of people. History, he said, was leading things to a point where Christian ethics would become so much part of our DNA, that a formal Church with formal teachings would no longer be needed, but rather Christian ethics would emerge through political movement. Christianity would be abstracted from the forms of Christian teaching and worship (the Church) and become organically reconstituted through liberal government (the State). For New Agers, the “Age of the Spirit” had come in which we would no longer need forms of the Church – its formal Word and Sacrament – but have direct knowledge of God interiorly. When the worship revolutionaries claim we are in a new age with new paradigms of worship, they are implicitly holding to this New Age understanding of history.

So, this issue of liturgical vs. “spiritual” worship is part of a much larger philosophical movement.

If the Bible guides worship, how does it do so? What is true biblical worship? How do we answer this question?

The Bible is a wax nose, and no one reads it without a lens. Without a “formalizing” principle, the Bible is just a speed bump on someone’s path to do what they wanted to do anyways. Where does the Bible say we cannot do clown services, or Superbowl Sunday, or pajama-pants Sunday, or that we cannot bring guns, fire them off, and have a square dance to Metallica music while a circus act is going on overhead? Thus the Bible can also lead to worship nihilism and relativism, but anyone can justify it because, again, they presume we live in a new age where the Holy Spirit tingles feelings in their hearts indicating his approval of Metallica/Gun/circus services. Someone’s heart may tingle against this worship, so that the whole issue becomes a game of “whose heart tingles more?”

Obviously there must be formalizing principles, and generally these are the theological “first principles” of a given church tradition. Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Reformed all have their various “first principles” that guide how worship is done.

What are the “first principles” in historic worship (and I believe Lutheran worship) that guide how the Bible guides worship? I would begin with these:

- (1) Christ is God in flesh; He remains in the flesh; if He is present in the Church through worship, this means Christ is bodily present. How is this so, what does this mean, and how does this influence worship?
- (2) Because Christ is God in “the form of a bondservant,” that is, the form of a human being (the Word made flesh), and because this didn’t change with His ascension (I John 4: 3), and because He promises to be with us when we gather (Matthew 18: 20), we would expect formal properties going on somewhere in worship. In fact, we believe these to be the formal Word of Christ – He is present where His Word is taught and preached (Luke 10: 16) – and the formal bread and wine/His Body and Blood of communion (Matthew 26: 26). Also in the praises of the congregation and the confession of the people themselves, the Lord is present. (Psalm 22: 3; Eph. 4: 12)
- (3) Grace is related to Christ’s formal nature. A gift is not fully a gift if it does not take a physical form. The less Christ is located in formal properties, the more the burden is mine to induce his presence through my mind, emotions, or will. If Christ is God in flesh, he can be a blessing to children (Matthew 19: 14), something we bring our children to. When Christ is no longer seen as a formal presence through the Church today, then He can only come through the efforts of my mind, emotions, or will (which is why young children aren’t fit for this program). Grace says that Christ has given Himself to us as a pure, unconditional gift without any effort on our part.

Formal worship spells out this concept. The words are given me to say. I don't have to induce strong feelings in my heart, mind, or will to effect true worship.

- (4) If Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, but also present in the Church, this means that worship is "heaven on earth." Worship is the gathering of saints around the throne of Christ. What evidence from Scripture feeds this understanding? What songs of angels do we know from Scripture? What examples of worship do we have about early worship?
- (5) Christ's life was marked by a death/life cycle, as is fitting for a Lord who "kills and brings to life." Throughout the Bible this pattern seems to follow: Joseph going down to prison before being lifted to the right hand of Pharaoh; David struggling in the wilderness before ascending to his throne; Israel going through the wilderness before entering the Promised Land; flood/promise; blind Bartemaus begging "Lord have mercy" before healing; Jesus' death and resurrection. In other words, the life of a biblical saint is marked by sin/judgment/death/wrath followed by forgiveness/salvation/life/mercy.
- (6) The justification of the sinner is the heart and center of the Gospel. What is justification? It is the doctrine that we stand before God righteous through Christ's forgiveness, and this through faith in the external Word. The liturgy is exactly that. It is us literally standing before the throne of God and received by Him through the Body and Blood of Christ, and this through the external Word, the very words of the liturgy. As we participate in these words, we are embracing the faith of the Church and making it our own.

These "first principles" are not only supported by the Scriptures but have historic precedence. In other words, they were not just some pastor feeling the Holy Spirit moving him to find some idiosyncratic first principles scoured from obscure places in the Bible. It's an approach in which one behaves as a servant of tradition rather than a charismatically-endowed leader.

Historic (traditional) worship vs. revolutionary worship: on what basis does the church have right to proclaim "new paradigms of worship"? (The "servant of tradition" vs. "charismatic leader" conundrum.)

Operating under the pretense that sometime around the 1960s, there was an "outpouring of the Holy Spirit" or a "latter day rain," many Church leaders believed they had the right to cast aside the traditions as they have been handed on for 2,000 years. They went to "leadership conferences" at hotel retreats on weekends, paid consultants lots of money, to tell them that we have to "rethink worship." The focus was extremely man-centered. Lot's of "we" talk as in, "We have to redefine church," when in fact, Christ is the one who builds His Church.

But that is the nature of a charismatic leader. As with the Gnostics of old, the millenarian cults of the Middle Ages, the Anabaptist sects, the revivalist movements in the 19th century, and current evangelicalism, the movements are extremely personality-driven. They are personality cults. They center on the charisma of a person who claims to be spirit-endowed, a modern day prophet. This has always, always, always ended badly.

By contrast, St. Paul talked about how he was a clay vessel, so that "the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." (II Cor. 4:7) Likewise was Moses a bad speaker. Leadership, in other words, is not about the person, but about passing on something bigger than the person. Much in the same way we don't want police officers to establish their own laws and enforce them based on their personal charisma – another word for that is tyranny – but we want police officers to be servants of the Law.

The historic liturgy aligns with this latter understanding of God's messengers. The Church is bigger than its ministers, and as a member of the Church I should be able to go to any church and expect something relatively uniform, because its ministers are behaving as servants of something bigger than themselves, rather than as spirit-endowed prophets who claim their idiosyncratic musings trump 2,000 years of history.

Jeroboam vs. Jerusalem worship: the fetishizing of relevancy (what are the modern “gods” we syncretize with)

At the end of King Solomon’s reign, Israel was split into southern and northern kingdoms. Rehoboam was king of Judah; Jeroboam was the king of Israel. Jeroboam had a problem, because all his citizens were going to the temple at Jerusalem to worship. So he came upon a plan. He would set up “his own” ministry, “his own” sacrifices, and “his own” holy places. Still, even those these means changed, the message was the same. That is, when he pointed to the golden calves, he said, “This is the God who brought you up out of Egypt.” In other words, he proposed the same God, but he was simply re-thinking Church, or thinking outside of the box of Jerusalem worship. He was coming up with new means – not the ark of the covenant but these golden calves, for instance. Hey, two cherubim, two calves, what’s the big deal? What’s really the difference? Isn’t worship all about the spirit, all about what’s going on in my heart and soul?

Yet, that sin became the defining sin in the latter period of the kings. Israel was lost to history because of that sin.

Where did Jeroboam get the idea to use two golden calves? He got them from his neighboring culture. He was attempting to be “relevant” to his people. He wanted to compete with Jerusalem worship so he had to offer something more marketable. Incidentally, this is why the northern kingdom (like King Ahab) perpetually struggled with witchcraft. It was the worship form of neighboring Syria.

Is there an American cultural religion that we dare not adapt to Christian worship? Are there American cultural gods we dare not use as means by which we worship our Triune Lord?

Absolutely there are. The American gods are many, but the beginning of that list would surely be: the Self, individualism, personal comfort (materialism), entertainment, and fun. In a nutshell, the American places at the heart and center of his life the pursuit of a happiness defined by personal comfort, wellbeing, and a sense of satisfaction. You might call it an ongoing dopamine rush. Does this not explain our addictive personalities, our obsession with media, our ever-seeking of drugs and alcohol? It’s all about the centrality of the Self as the instrument of personal well being.

Historic worship asks us to leave these gods behind. Worship is about the gifts our Lord embraces us in by gathering us around His throne. That means eternal life, but it also means a cross in this world. Historic worship cares little about personal comfort and well being. It’s not about the Self, but about Jesus.

So, what does it mean when Robert Schuller decided Self Esteem should drive the Church’s message when he proclaimed a “New Reformation”? Is this not an attempt to make the Church relevant by adapting to the cultural gods? Or, what does it mean when churches use music as a replacement for the preaching of doctrine or the Sacrament? Is this not an attempt to be relevant by adapting to American media gods?

Being relevant has become a fetish, a strange obsession that brings terror when not used properly. A pastor dreads the possibility that he is sounding too “churchy” or “outdated” by using language from the bible, or preaching about a 2,000 year old messiah. So he frantically reads the latest magazines about what is “trending” and what are the concerns of people. He’ll come up with the “six things you need to know about this.” and “four ways to be a better that” type sermons, patterned after women’s magazines. Of course, certain people love such sermons – they are in fact quite good! – because it feeds their Self-absorption.

The problem is several-fold. First off, it’s not healthy to give people the gods they want. Aaron learned this lesson in the wilderness. So did Jeroboam. Second, it feeds the idea that proper preaching is something arcane and therefore boring. True, our culture may be at a point where you cannot talk to anyone without them thinking, “Blah, blah, blah, what does this have to do with me,” but surely this selfish behavior isn’t something we want to encourage in the church, is it? By preaching about Christ and His teachings – and not using such things as window dressing for a Self-focused message – we subtly teach the hearer that they, in fact, are not the heart and center of their lives. And actually, once they understand this

point, the preaching will become quite comforting, like a liberation from Self-obsession and the Selfish pursuit of that ongoing dopamine rush. Finally, this “relevancy” fetish assumes a generic “what the people want” when in fact there are many people, yes, in the minority, who break away from demographic molds. In fact, you might say there is a name for such people, Christian. These are people who don’t fit marketing analysis. They aren’t looking for a church that “fits their needs” but one that is true regardless of how it relates to them personally. Again, these are in the minority, and perhaps an increasing minority, but this has always been what a Christian is, someone who denies his Self, takes up the hard way of the cross, and sets his mind not on himself but on Jesus. Those traits will not show up on a market analysis.

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

Is it something we come up with, or something we take part in? (Rev. 4; Luke 2; Isaiah 6)

One of my personal epiphanies regarding worship was the moment I realized worship is not something “we do” but something we are granted by grace to take part in. As an army chaplain I once attended two services right after the other at a weekend drill. The first was a Roman Catholic mass; the second was an evangelical service.

The priest began his service with a prayer based on the liturgy, something to the effect of, “Oh Christ, who sits at God’s right hand, you have gathered us here today and by your mercies receive us before your holy throne, have mercy on us, forgive our sins, and receive our prayer.” And then, the rest of the service lived out exactly what he prayed! We were gathered around Christ – Who was, is, and always will be in the flesh! Our simply being there was a powerful testimony to our justification before God. The service itself was pure grace, a gift, the unconditional acceptance of us by Christ. And the service was constructed of formal words testifying to this truth. The forms of worship testified to the reality of Christ, His sitting at God’s right hand, His bloody sacrifice for us, and His grace by which we might be in communion with Him. We were granted to take part in the ongoing heavenly worship.

In the second service, the chaplain assistant first set up the chairs so they were not facing the altar, the place where Christ was present (the throne), but facing each other. In other words, the Body of Christ was not confessed to be something formally present through the Sacrament, but present in each other through the personal spiritual endowment of each person there. And evidently – the way this panned out – this meant each person prattling on about whatever they felt the text at hand was talking about, which as a trained theologian often missed the mark! But according to this “new paradigm of worship,” who am I with all my book-learning and training to trump what the Holy Spirit is inspiring Sister Sue to carry on about? In any event, the way this service began was with the chaplain assistant saying, “OK, everyone’s here. Let’s rock n’ roll!”

What an interesting contrast! But yet how insightful. The first service was Christ-centered and testified to the historic reality that Christ is now sitting at God’s right hand. The doorway into this reality was the priest’s formal prayer spelling out the grace by which we could be there. The second service was more about the personal testimonies of the people there, testifying not to the realities of Christ but to the realities of their own lives and what they think God is doing in their lives. The doorway into this worship was not anything about Christ, but a throwaway reference to a musical style that has housed some of the greatest wretchedness, rebellion, drug use, and sexual perversity known to mankind, rock n’ roll. Relevant? Perhaps so. Holy and true? Not at all.

Once you realize worship is a heavenly reality we are granted to take part in, so much of historic worship makes sense. Also, historic worship is seen as the solidly biblical worship it in fact is. Let’s do look at the details as briefly as is possible, using the order of service:

(I) Invocation

The invocation begins the service “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit.” We call upon the Lord’s name because that was the climax of the first Christian sermon and the fulfillment of the prophecy proclaiming the Holy Spirit’s advent: “And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.” This aligns nicely with Jesus’ promise that He will be present with those who gather in His name. And this is how St. Paul defined the Church in his introductory remarks to the church at Corinth: “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” Simply put, a Christian is someone who calls upon the name of the Lord, thus true worship will be a calling on the name of the Lord. What name? The name we have been baptized in, the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 28: 19)

(2) Introit

The introit is a Christianized Psalm. A Psalm alone could be Jewish or Muslim. An introit makes a Psalm Christian, because it adds the *Gloria Patri*, the “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy spirit.” In any event, using Psalms continues Old Testament worship, as the Psalms have always been the church’s prayer book. By concluding the Psalm with the Gloria Patri, the Church confesses that the Old Testament is ultimately Christ-centered, and not properly used in a non-Christian context. (See Luke 24: 44; II Corinthians 3: 14)

(3) Kyrie

The *Kyrie* prays “Lord, have mercy upon us.” This is, again, a formal prayer rooted in the forms laid out for us in the Gospel itself. Almost every time there was a healing in the Gospel, that story began with someone praying “Lord, have mercy.” Thus, by taking this formal prayer upon our lips, we are taking part in this great story ourselves. Several times in the Gospel the story beginning with “Lord, have mercy” ended with Jesus saying “Great is your faith,” and every time it ended with Jesus having compassion. How could the Church – the body of those gathered in and around Christ – do better than to mouth the words that end with Jesus’ compassion?

(4) The Gloria in Excelsis

The Gloria in Excelsis is the first of two angelic canticles, the second one being the sanctus. This is perhaps the finest example of how we are granted access to heavenly worship. The syllogism goes like this: (a) What happens when one sinner repents? Answer: the angels rejoice (Luke 15: 10 says, “Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”); (b) Do we have an example of what “joy in the presence of angels” is in the Bible? Answer: Yes, in three places we are granted a glimpse of what the angels are singing as they rejoice, Isaiah 6, Luke 2, and Revelation 5, that is, the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy), Gloria in Excelsis (Glory to God in the highest), and the This is the Feast (For the Lamb that was slain...) So, when we sing these angelic canticles, we testify to the reality that we are joining an ongoing song of angels. The song goes on and on; we merely drift in and out of it as circumstances dictate.

(5) The Creed

“Our creed is the Bible” says the Baptist, and so they eschew creeds as so much “man made tradition.” Yet, do this exercise. Go through the Bible and mark the “high point beliefs” that one must believe in order to be saved. I actually did this during an especially boring class at seminary. I went through and every time there was a passage in which Jesus or an apostle

said something like, “OK, this is really important; this is the stuff that saves you,” I marked that text. Here’s what came up: “I believe in one God. I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, who has come into the flesh, died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” (Deuteronomy 6: 4; John 20: 31; Romans 10: 9; I John 4: 3; I Corinthians 15: 3-4; et. al.) This is the foundation of the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed! The additional elements of the Creed are all biblically based as well, for example, the phrase “maker of heaven and earth” is used eight times to confess the Lord God in the Old Testament. Or again, the most quoted Psalm is Psalm 110, which speaks of Christ’s ascension as well. Or, when the Nicene Creed added words to emphasize that Jesus is truly God, they were beefing up – based on the Church’s tradition and Scripture teaching – that Jesus is truly God in flesh. Furthermore, the creed is not some ritualistic mumbo jumbo that we’re not obligated to do. Rather, Jesus says, “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.” To say the creed is a wonderful moment when, at the same time, Christ is confessing our names (from the Book of Life) before the Heavenly Father. Again, we are in heaven at worship, and what we do testifies to heavenly realities going on, at least as Christ tells us they are going on. So, to confess Christ is given us, and what do we confess? Again, we confess the formal teachings of the Scripture which the Scripture itself says save us.

Creed also unifies...

(6) Holy Communion

Holy Communion is weekly. St. Paul was writing in an idiom of surprise and frustration when he said, “Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.” (I Corinthians 11: 20) The idea is, when you come together for church, how could you do anything other than what the Lord has instituted to be done when you gather together, namely, Holy Communion? They were coming to do their own things, not eat the Lord’s Supper. At the Last Supper, Jesus gave out bread and wine and with these gifts said, “This is My Body...This is My Blood.” These gifts testified to His forgiveness for us at the cross. He said, “This do,” meaning, it is a mandate. It’s something He has given us to do, like a doctor saying “Drink this medicine to be saved.” It’s not Law; it’s setting up forms by which a gift is given. Again, true gifts must be formal, or else some human effort is needed to make them gifts: It’s the difference between a lover having an old love letter through which he has to conjure up fantasies that his beloved still loves him, versus a lover having his beloved right there in the flesh and blood saying “I love you.” That’s what Holy Communion is. When Jesus said, “This do,” the Church understood this to mean “This whole service continue,” meaning, the liturgy Jesus was doing as He was giving out the gift, namely, the blessing, the giving thanks, the whole Passover liturgy He was taking over and renovating according to the “New Testament in His blood.” What liturgy is this? It’s pretty much what has been “passed on” from Christ Himself through the Church down to this day. St. Paul testifies to this “tradition” (which means literally, “the passed on thing”) when he referenced Holy Communion in his letter to the Corinthians, when he said, “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered [lit. “traditioned”] to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread...”

That is the basic outline of the liturgy. There’s much more to the liturgy, all of it biblical. Guided by the “first principles” laid down above, these elements nicely call us to leave our personal gods behind and

take part in the ongoing Gospel event, an event continuing now in heaven, where Christ sits at God's right hand.

Is it a cerebral, emotional, or will-based thing, or a physically-based reality? (A matter of the mind or something real going on?)

By now this point has hopefully been made clear. The greater Christ is understood formally – as God taking on the forms of flesh, blood, and speaking through formal words – the more He is gift. Also, derivatively, the more He is applicable for young and old alike.

By contrast, the more Christ is understood informally – as something spiritually floating around “out there” that we connect with internally, or in the heart, or in the mind – the more human effort is required to “make it happen.” That is, the more human intellect, emotions, or will I needed to effect His presence. Therefore the less He is gift. And again, derivatively, the less He is applicable for the mentally disabled and children.

Consider two examples. If we understand Grandma formally, we must understand her in the forms by which she exists, through her body and blood and through the actions she does in her flesh. If Grandma is to be received, she must be received in this way and no other. There's no pretending or imagining what Grandma is through fantasies and whatnot. No, Grandma is no more and no less than what she is through the forms by which she comes to us. And insofar as we love Grandma, it is because she gives of herself through these means. Both child and adult, even infant, can enjoy her hugs, her recipes, or the smells of her house. She is an objective gift.

By contrast, when she dies, if anyone would “realize” her presence or existence, it must be through mental or emotional efforts of the human will. It has to be by fantasy. Certainly no infant can partake, because their minds are not developed. She is not fully there so long as she is not there formally through her flesh and blood. The “giftedness” of grandma is gone once her flesh and blood presence is gone. Sure, some of her “giftedness” can be conjured up through memories (remembrances), replicated tastes, pictures, and whatnot. But we know it's never quite the same.

The same is true of Christ. The greater He is understood to be present through the formal means of bread and wine – His flesh and blood presence – the greater He is gift. The less human effort is needed to “conjure up” His presence in our minds. Likewise, children and the mentally disabled can receive the objective gift as well, His presence not being dependant on their mental efforts.

Again, let us consider the gift of a coffee cup. The “giftedness” of the cup is directly related to the extent to which that cup lives up to the formal properties of a coffee cup. A handle, a cradle for pouring, thick ceramic to insulate heat, etc. It's a true gift, used for the purpose it was made. By contrast, imagine someone giving the gift of taking about a coffee cup, without form. Now, the coffee cup becomes whatever you feel you must do in order to effect the purpose of the coffee cup. It could be spilling the coffee on a table and sopping it up with a napkin and sucking the coffee out of the napkin. It could be lapping it up like a dog from a bowl. Whatever it becomes, the point is, I now become an element in the “gift event.” I now become a player in the giftedness of the coffee cup, because it's my job to come up with the meaning of what a coffee cup is.

The same is true with Christ. When He is conveyed to us through objective, formal means that are clearly outlined in the Gospel, His gifted presence is there and my only role in the event is to receive the gift. I don't have to manufacture his presence by putting chairs in circle, or by getting everyone to hold hands, or by singing Kumbaya, or whatever. It's a gift, an objective gift.

Here's a good entrance point into understanding the physical reality that is the liturgy. It has to do with the explanation for why the Church uses incense. Why would the Church use incense? Very often people get metaphorical, and speak of incense as the prayers of the faithful ascending into heaven. This is a good interpretation, and it is based on God's Word. But there's actually a more simple explanation getting to the heart of what's going on in the liturgy.

It's the answer to a simple question: when Jesus rose from the dead, what did He smell like? He was buried with spices, which alludes to aromatic spices or oils, in other words, incense. So when He appeared to the apostles, the smell of incense would announce His presence. Even if this did not historically happen – as the Scriptures never say one way or the other what exactly Jesus smelled like – the incense in Church confesses something extremely true and powerful: the same Jesus that died and was buried also arose in that same body! Furthermore, the Church which is His Body, if it smelled like anything, would smell like the One in Whom the Church is constituted.

It also helps, of course, that Jesus is “an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.” (Ephesians 5: 2) In turn, as we pray through the liturgy, through Christ our prayers are received by the Father as incense (Revelation 8: 4). But the incensing of the altar, the minister, and the people is a powerful testimony to a very real thing, that Jesus Christ Himself is bodily present in worship, and that the entire event is a sweet smelling prayer to the Father. That, indeed, why the liturgy is sometimes called a sacrifice. It's a sacrifice of prayer and thanksgiving through Christ.

Historic precedence (Acts 2)

Acts 2 arguably gives us an account of what happened on the first day of the Church. The Church was born on Pentecost, and Acts 2 outlines exactly what happened. What happened when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven?

First off, let's remember what Jesus promised about the Holy Spirit. In John 16 Jesus taught it was good for Him to return to heaven (at God's right hand) because once that happened, He could send the Holy Spirit, Whose task very specifically was “take of what is Mine and declare it to you.” The Holy Spirit, in other words, gives us what belongs to Jesus at God's right hand, and this He does through the Word (by declaration).

St. Paul refers to this understanding of the Holy Spirit when he writes, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.’”

Jesus was like a victorious general when He sat down at God's right hand. He sent out the Holy Spirit to deliver the spoils of His war against Satan. What were His spoils? The souls of men! Our souls which were in bondage to the devil. This was what Jesus was referring to when He said in Luke 11: 20-22, “But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils.”

Jesus is the stronger man, and He's dividing the spoils of His battle with Satan with us. In short, these spoils are eternal life, forgiveness, and salvation.

So, the giving out of the Holy Spirit is a gift which gives to us everything Jesus has attained first by His descent into hell – where He defeated Satan and won back our souls – and His ascension, where He enjoys communion with the Father in the status as the Son of God. And this gift is given by declaration, by the proclamation of the Word.

Jesus told the disciples just before He ascended to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit was given out. Ten days later, the disciples were in the upper room, when suddenly there was a rushing sound. Of course it would be a sound, because the Holy Spirit works “by declaration,” just as Jesus said. Also, Jesus had compared the Holy Spirit already to the wind in the Gospel of John when He said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

The point being, the Holy Spirit wasn't a feeling, or some mystical thing happening in the silence. It was a rushing sound, a wind. All that was needed was a set of mouths to articulate the Holy Spirit's testimony into actual words, words in all the diverse languages. And this is exactly what happened. The apostles began speaking “the wonderful works of God” in different languages.

What were they speaking? We get a front row seat to the answer to this question, for Acts 2 continues with a recording of St. Peter's sermon. Here is a brief outline of what happened:

- (1) He quoted the prophet Joel, an Old Testament reading, about calling on the Lord's name
- (2) He testified to Jesus' life and work
- (3) He quoted the Psalms
- (4) He preached the basics of the Christian creed (Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into heaven)
- (5) He quoted Psalms again
- (6) He preached repentance and baptism
- (7) He exhorted them to be saved from this evil generation
- (8) The people were baptized
- (9) The people continued in the Apostles' Teaching (catechesis)
- (10) The people continued in Holy Communion
- (11) The people prayed "the prayers" (probably the Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, and the prayers of the Jewish liturgy)

To summarize, Peter quoted the Old Testament, the Psalms, gave a testimony of Jesus' life, preached repentance, and then the people were baptized, were taught the Apostles' teaching, had communion, and prayed the prayers. That's liturgy! Every part of the liturgy is present in this opening proclamation. Peter's proclamation was just as Jesus promised, a proclamation that Jesus was at God's right hand, a declaration of everything Jesus possessed at God's right hand: exaltation, salvation, eternal life, and forgiveness. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, the people would be wrapped up into His exaltation by faith in the words. It spelled out exactly what Joel had prophesied, that whoever calls on the name of the Lord would be saved. Peter all but confessed the Christian creed. It included Old Testament readings, Psalms, and the testimony of the apostles (the Gospel). It had confession of sins and pleas for mercy. It had the catechesis into the teachings of the apostles. Finally, it was a blessing "for you and for your children." Just as Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me." The apostles learned their lesson not to hinder the children, but include them in the gifts of the Holy Spirit given in baptism.

"The prayers" that the people continued is a reference to specific prayers the early Church prayed. These were very likely the Psalms, but also likely the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus commanded we pray (Luke 11: 2), but also very likely the prayers of the Jewish liturgy that carried over into the communion liturgy.

As the Church spread and grew, this liturgy didn't stay the same. It developed slowly. Like a plant divided and transplanted into new areas, it grew organically relative to the region in which it grew. There were different liturgies that emphasized different aspects of the full proclamation, but the basics of the liturgy were set, which isn't too different than what the Church yet today does in liturgy.

In the liturgy, the Holy Spirit establishes through the Word the very forms which testify to the new reality which is the Church: through repentance and baptism, based on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, the saints are called out of the world and gathered into everything Christ has made available by sitting down at God's right hand, communing with Him through His Body and Blood. Remember, by the way, that Pentecost was a harvest festival!

Do we do the liturgy, or does the liturgy do us? Do we do the faith, or does the faith do us? (Same question!)

When we understand the formal nature of the God-made-flesh, Jesus, and the formal nature of the Church – with all the forms the Holy Spirit has established through the Word, which wrap us into Christ's position at God's right hand – we can understand something beautiful about the Church's formal worship. That is, the objective forms of worship stand on their own. They are always going on because Jesus is always going on. His formal existence – His bodily status at God's right hand – is eternal. The Church is His Body, so it cannot be as if the Church is only the Church when a bunch of people decide to get together and be the Church. No, as Jesus says, "I will build my Church." Or about the temple He says,

“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” He was speaking of His body.

He is the Word made flesh, the Word being the specific work of the Holy Spirit. The Word of Jesus comes to us through forms – this was the whole point of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost speaking the wonderful works of God in different languages. The words and grammar of language is the architecture that builds the body of Christ that is the Church!

For example, to call upon the name of the Lord doesn't mean to say “pink bananas dance vigorously near moonbeams.” No, it means something approaching “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That's the form that invoking the Lord takes, and it's a form shaped by the Word of God. As we drift from that form and add little things here and there, or water down the language, or blur the grammar, we lose the form, and again, we lose the giftedness of what's going on. The whole liturgy is of this nature. The liturgy is the Holy Spirit's architecture of the Church of God, and the various architectural features are the forms of His words.

That being said, let's go back to our analogy of the coffee cup. In a sense, we might say, we don't do the coffee cup, but the coffee cup does us, that is, if it is going to truly be a gift. What I mean is, once you get the gift of a coffee cup, again, you don't proceed to craft by your own efforts some creative way to effect the event of drinking coffee. No, the coffee cup itself dictates how this will happen: pour coffee into the cup; hold the handle; drink. As long as you submit to the cup's purpose, the cup behaves as a gift. As you lose sight of its purpose, say, putting the cup upside down, or pouring the coffee two inches to the left of its receptacle, the cup is no longer a gift.

The coffee cup is gift the extent to which I conform to its formal nature. In the same way we might speak of faith in Christ. Jesus Christ – and the Holy Spirit's declaration of His gifts – is gift the extent to which I conform by faith to His formal nature in the Church. Put another way, faith takes the exact contours of the gift formally given. Or back to the coffee cup analogy, my reception of the cup as a gift works only to the extent that my hand conforms to the contours of the cup's formal nature. I have to curl my index finger around the handle, squeeze with the thumb, balance on my middle finger, etc. I have to dip it into my lips. So long as I conform to the contours of the cup, it is a gift. When I drift from that, it is no longer a gift.

The form of Jesus is similar, if He is to be received as gift. If I am a leper, Jesus is most “gift” when I approach Him praying the humble prayer “Lord, have mercy,” when I confess Him to be the Christ, the Son of God, my Lord, and when I faithfully receive His touch of mercy where His flesh and blood hand is extended out to me. If I went six feet to the right of Jesus and prayed “Lord, have mercy,” Jesus would not be gift. If I went to where Jesus is present and said, “Hey, dude, do some magic for me,” Jesus would not be gift. If when Jesus extended His hand I flinched and said, “Don't touch me!” Jesus would not be gift.

But when I approach Jesus through the forms of worship, He is gift. And like the coffee cup, the gift itself dictates how this happens. Meaning, I don't “do” the forms of the liturgy. Rather, the forms of the liturgy do my faith.

The best example of how this all works is the example of children. The disciples would have prevented the children from seeing Jesus, where He put His hand on them and blessed them. But Jesus said, “Let the little children come unto me, for unto such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven.” The children were put in position to receive Jesus as gift by the parents, and Jesus told the apostles to allow that. The children weren't doing their faith – they were too young – but that didn't prevent Jesus from giving them Himself as a gift and blessing them.

Or again, let us consider the lame man brought by the four friends in Matthew 9. The text says that when Jesus saw “their” faith, meaning the faith of the four men, He said to the lame man, “Your sins are forgiven.” The lame man, we might say, was carried along by the faith of the Church, and based on that faith, Jesus gave the man absolution.

How often are we at church, drifting in and out of the service? For some, this is a scandal. How can we claim to be Christian and not have 100% attention! But it's not a scandal at all. Even if we drift out of

the service – perhaps for years at a time! – the Church is still carrying our faith. The Church, after all, prays “our” Father, not “my” Father. The Church, again, is the Body of Christ, and Christ is always going on. He is always praying “Our Father.” It’s His prayer, after all! This means that He’s always praying for us, and the Church too is taking part in this ongoing prayer.

St. Paul is referencing this mystery when he writes, “For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” (Romans 8: 15-16, 26)

Again, this is the work of the Holy Spirit, to give to us what is going on at God’s right hand, in this case, it is Jesus’ eternal intercession on our behalf, ever and always praying to His Father on behalf of the Church, “Our Father...” When we pray this prayer, it is a wonderful gift of Christ wrapping us into Himself, and He does it by literally wrapping our lips into the formal words of the Lord’s Prayer.

The principle of catholicity: we are not a sect; we join the saints of all saints and all places.

The thing about a coffee cup is that, if it is going to be a gift in the sense of the purpose for which it was crafted, it calls everyone who uses it to the same action: to curl the index finger, balance with the middle finger, squeeze with the thumb, and dip with the wrist. Those actions must become universal. Different people will do those actions differently, but the basics of the process are pretty much the same, and again, they are always dictated by the formal properties of the cup.

So also the liturgy. The liturgy is catholic. The realities formed liturgically do not change. It’s not as if Jesus sits at the left hand of God in Africa, or the angels sing “Wow! Wow! Wow!” in Asia. No, so long as Scripture is foundational, and the Holy Spirit gives us the words which establish our worship, the formal properties of that worship will be relatively universal. Again, different things may be emphasized in different areas. One place may hold the coffee cup differently, or cradle it in the left hand, or whatever, but always the formal nature of the coffee cup dictates, or formalizes, its purpose.

This is the catholicity of the Church.

The catholicity of the Church says that what happens in worship is bigger than what is going on in my little world with my little pastor. On Sunday morning (or whenever) we are part of something way bigger than my little corner of the world.

The Pharaical/legalistic canard. Christ was not an antinomian.

To all this “formalism” going on, some will say, “But the Pharisees were all about outward form, rituals, and going through the motions. It became hypocritical worship. Rather, worship should be a matter of the inner spirit, the heart, and authenticity.”

But by their understanding of Pharisaism, it would be “legalistic” simply to say that healing was located through the form of Christ and not through the form of the man standing next to Christ. By God merely taking on the form of Christ, evidently, He’s boxing Himself in and tyrannically saying salvation is here and not there. When it comes to Jesus Himself this is absurd, but when it comes to His Body, the Church, this is exactly how people behave. It’s said to be legalistic Pharisaism when someone says grace and God’s presence is located here and not there, or that true worship is according to these forms and not these forms (or lack of forms).

Luther used to say, “God is everywhere, but where is He for you?” He meant that, yes, it is true, God is everywhere. God is present in the sunrise, the gentle rain, but also the hurricane and the scorching heat. We are not pantheistic and say He IS the sunrise or hurricane, but being omnipresent, there is not a place in the universe where He is not fully present and in control.

Still, the universe is fallen. Adam gave dominion of the creation over to the devil, so the devil is now “this world’s prince.” Yes, Satan is under God’s management (see, Job). But consider what this means. As

in the story of Job, Satan becomes an instrument of God's wrath. Satan works out what we call the alien nature of God, that is, the cloud of uncertainty, wrath, and silence that we identify with the darkness of our fallen world. We are not Gnostics who say this is not God, or outside His control. We confess that He is almighty and ultimately in control of all things.

This is why it is so glorious that God took on human flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ and showed us, not His alien work, but His proper work, which is love, forgiveness, mercy, and salvation. Outside of Jesus it is true: God is present. But the God that is present is His alien work – the result of our fallen condition – which sometimes manifests as the work of Satan in our lives! It is wrath, or judgment, or sometimes worse, complete silence.

But when we see God through Jesus Christ, we see Him in His primary and proper work, as a God of love. In turn, through Jesus Christ we are able to reclaim a sacred vision of the whole world, even the fallen world, because we see it through the cross of Christ. In Christ was the world created and in Christ was the world redeemed, and this through the cross. Thus, as we look at the world through Christ we see the alien work of God working toward its ultimate redemption. Like St. Paul, we see “that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.” (Romans 8: 22) But take away the form of Christ and His cross, and that vision is lost.

The same continues today. In the midst of our fallen, dark world, the Church and its liturgy bring us the form of Christ post-ascension. All around may be wrath, doubt, confusion, and a fog of uncertainty, but at the liturgy, here is the word that says “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” And where there is calling on the name of the Lord, there is salvation. Or here is the word that says “I believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who came in flesh, died, and rose again.” And again, where this is being confessed, salvation is going on. Or finally, of course, at the Church is the words that says, “This is My Body, given for you.” Where Christ is present, there is salvation. No doubt. No fear. No wondering about God's attitude toward me based on personal experience. No, like the blind man that Jesus healed – and His question about why this was the case: was it his sin or his parent's sin? – it was about glorifying Jesus, pointing out Jesus, because through Jesus it's not about our life circumstances and what these tell us about God. It's about a God Who comes down to save us in whatever life circumstance we are in.

Is this Pharisaical? To say Christ is here and not there? Not any more than it is Pharisaical or legalistic to say that a coffee cup, to fully work, must have coffee poured into it and then used in the manner it was crafted. Sure, someone could say, “Let's think outside the box! Using the cup in the same way over and over and over again is boring. Let's put it upside down and pour the coffee around it like a moat, and then lap it up. Who are you to say how a coffee cup must be used?!”

But is this not ridiculous?

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Consumeristic Christianity and Emergent Christianity (the Willow Creek (Hybels) realization); it only works in the short term!

Recently Bill Hybels came out and said his church growth model wasn't working anymore. Sure, his focus on the consumeristic desires of his target market brought people in who wanted to be able to say they went to church without having to deal with the boredom of God's Word and Sacrament. But then as soon as the buzz wore off, people moved on.

You might say, “If you live by pop culture, you will die by pop culture.” Many a pop star has learned this the hard way. What many consider “contemporary worship” today is actually more like “Baby Boom worship” of auditorium seating, grand dramatic displays, motivational talks, and praise bands front and center. For many, this is so twenty years ago.

Some of those reacting against the Hybels model have gone over to Emergent Christianity. Emergents are like children playing in the attic of Christian tradition, picking and choosing what they like in

their pursuit of “authentic” Christian worship: sacraments, mysticism, prayer techniques. They cannot return to those historic church bodies that actually use those traditional elements because that would ruin the buzz that they are vanguards of the newest “new paradigms” of “emerging” Christianity. In the end it’s just another emulation of pop culture, the Christian parallel to pop culture’s desire to be “spiritual but not religious.”

The problem with trying to emulate pop culture is, the Church and its Gospel is eternal. It’s something that’s supposed to transcend time. It’s supposed to be a break from pop culture and whatever is “trending” out there. There’s something refreshing about going to a place where things don’t change, where what you’re doing isn’t so different than what was going on there five hundred years ago, where both young and old can be present.

We understand this when it comes to other “formal” affairs, like a wedding or funeral, or a political ceremony. But why don’t we understand this when it comes to church?

If children aren’t welcome there, something’s wrong.

Jesus said, “Let the children come unto me, for unto such as these is the kingdom of heaven.” Yet, the last time I visited a mega-church using contemporary worship, the children were encouraged to go elsewhere because – as it was told to me – the main service might not be appropriate for children.

Children naturally don’t like rock n’ roll because it’s a harsh music form. Teens like it because they’re hormonal. And as people age, they tend toward softer music like jazz, classical, or softer rock. Some look at these facts and say this is a reason why there should be several church services, to serve several different styles. But church is not Pandora where you can tailor it exactly to your style, or a radio where you just have to turn the dial (go up the street) until you find a style that “meets your needs.” Church is the place where the Holy Spirit gathers the saints together as one. The music should support the content, not vice versa. What music should this be? A music form that doesn’t offend the ears of anyone from 0-110. Hymns may be boring relative to someone’s favorite rock group – of course this would be the case, would it not? – but only in the same way that the music form of any given context will end up wearying someone after awhile.

But church is not about the music. It’s about Jesus Christ and the forms by which He comes to us today. When this principle is respected, the Church will always be a place for children.

I once took my daughter to a contemporary church service. During the sermon, the pastor decided it would better communicate his message if he played a Youtube video of a flash mob. The scene was a train station, and suddenly in the middle of a rush hour, a bunch of the people stopped what they were doing and began to dance to the tune of “Doe, a Deer” from the Sound of Music. The dance began as relatively traditional, but toward the end of the song, the song changed into a more hip hoppy version, and the dance became more hip hoppy, with hips gyrating and strong sexual suggestion. I literally had to shield my daughter’s eyes from the content.

The pastor thought he would be cute to make a point outside of the preaching of the Word. He was going to “think outside the box” and use drama to make a point. Actually his point backfired, because he was trying to say missions are spontaneous – in fact a flash mob is actually a highly orchestrated event. And insofar as he erred from his task of proclaiming the Word – just like those who use rock n’ roll – suddenly the service became something where my daughter was no longer welcome. When that happens, something’s wrong.

The importance of ritual vis a vis true love, something to come back to, something to depend on.

People will say, “But the rituals are so boring. The liturgy is so boring. Just the same thing over and over again.” Then they interpret this as un-spirituality. Because, according to their reasoning, shouldn’t the Holy Spirit cause some sort of shiver? Shouldn’t there be tears, laughter, and strong emotion if the Holy Spirit is going on?

Actually, no. This is a view of the Holy Spirit from the Romantic Movement. It has nothing to do with historic Christianity or biblical Christianity. Yes, people cry in the Bible as a result of the Gospel. And yes, people cry as a result of liturgical worship. So be it. The Gospel involves all our emotions. The liturgy is not intended to be apathetic. But to put emotions as the be all and end all of one's determination whether the Holy Spirit is present or not is a dangerous path.

Imagine if we took that attitude toward our spouses. Imagine if someone said, "I need excitement in my marriage or I'll look elsewhere. I need to be charged emotionally, or I will not believe I'm being loved." The poor spouse will be saying, "Goodness, I work all day so you can live comfortably. I cook meals every day so you can sit down and enjoy them. I wash your clothes. I fix your faucets. I periodically get you flowers. We make love when we can. Sorry, but that's what a marriage is! That's love, baby! And you say that isn't enough?"

First off, the spouse is not permitted to say that is not enough. He or she has vowed to be with his/her spouse. Second, it ignores how love is truly worked out. Love is ritualistic. Love is long term dedication to serving another. It's not momentary excitement or thrill. It may involve that, but if that's what we're looking for – for every day to be a thrill ride – we will...

Well, we'll do what so many people do with their churches. They belong to a church for awhile until they get bored with it, then they move on to another exciting one. Then when that one bores them, they move on. Is it any wonder this parallels our attitude toward marriage, where spouses move on from one to the next when they feel they're no longer "fulfilled."

When someone dies, often the things we most remember about them were the things they did ritualistically, the things they did periodically, the things that defined them because it's what they did over and over again. Maybe even at the time they did them, we were bored by it: "There they go again." But when they die, it's those things we miss the most, and often would give anything to have back. The things that happen ritualistically and habitually or the things that bring comfort.

"You can't trust Bob, but you can always trust Bob to be Bob." Such a phrase is often said cynically of a person when they fall short of some behavior we would hope they'd have. "You can't trust Bob to be on time, but you can always trust Bob to be Bob," and that might mean you can always trust he'll come late, forget something, and cause problems for everyone in some way.

That's the bad way to look at the phrase, but there's a good way as well. "You can't count on Jesus to be the Jesus want Him to be, but we can always trust Jesus to be Jesus." If I want Jesus to be my fix, my love, or my drug, He'll let me down. But if I trust Jesus to be what He has promised to be through the habitual, week by week forms given through the liturgy, I will always have the Jesus He has intended to be for more, that is, a Jesus Who weekly says, "This is My Body and Blood, given for you." It's a Jesus Who gives Himself to us in His love. It's habitual and ritualistic, meaning, I can always count on it.

Who ever said that worship was supposed to be a dopamine rush? If we fall for that, we merely become one more peddler in the great American quest for the latest high, for the latest drug, the latest entertainment, the latest trend giving that dopamine rush which we feel makes life worth living.

Allan Bloom, who wrote the best-selling book *Closing of the American Mind*, made the observation that college students who were plugged into rock n' roll – very similar to those who had undergone drug treatment – were often numb to the exciting world of Western thought. The idea of taking part in a millennial-long conversation with the great classics of history – Aristotle, Jesus, Dante, Luther, Newton, Kant, Nietzsche, etc. – had no comparison to the sensations of listening to a Rolling Stones song or taking a drug. Once immersed in the ecstatic wave of a dopamine rush, everything else just became humdrum. The passion for life slipped away.

I believe the same crisis has infected the Church. For forty years, churches have said, "We have to offer a greater dopamine rush than what they're getting in pop culture, so they'll come here." But because this cannot be sustained, people are leaving in droves, looking for something better, something new, something more potent.

We dropped the ball there. We abandoned our heritage. For America, the Church could be like that grandparents who, after their drug addict grandson reaches rock bottom, say “Come on in. We’ll take care of you while you rehab. Why don’t you have one of Grandma’s cookies and a home cooked meals. And then, I’ll will take you to the hospital. But you’ll have to live by our rules. No more drugs!”

Instead, we became the enabling relatives who say, “Hey, you’re really cool, grandson! I want to be as cool as your drug-dealing friends. What can I offer you? You want to cook crack in our basement? Go ahead!”

The grandson will lose respect for this grandparent.