

The Emerging Church: Adapting Church Practices in Light of the Postmodern Era

By Sarah Schock
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“A good poem allows you to have your feet on the ground and your head in the air
simultaneously.” ~Seamus Heaney

May we have the eyes to see our place in the world and the imagination to see what our
place could be... to have our feet on the ground and heads in the air at once.

Chapter 1: The Dynamic Tension Between Church and Culture

Since the time of Christ, the Christian church has struggled to maintain an identity that makes it distinct amidst the surrounding culture. There has always been controversy and differing opinions about how the church and culture should relate, and whether the two should relate at all. In America, the relationship between the church and culture is particularly important because of governmental restrictions and the emphasis on individualism, among other factors. It is easy to see that the way we practice Christianity today in American churches is drastically different than the first churches we see in scripture and history books. The church has changed, which itself does not pose a problem. The problem at hand has to do with how the church maintains its core values despite changes in the culture, and what changes it can make, if any are necessary, to best live out its great commission in the world.

A Decline in Relevance

Our culture is now engaged in a pivotal time of change, entering a new era known as postmodernism. The church, notoriously behind the times when it comes to matters of emerging culture, has had some provocative issues posed in relationship to these changes. Some recent polls reflect the situation the American church currently finds itself in:

- 75% of Americans say they are Christians, but only 37% could name all four gospels.
- 60% of Americans say “religion” is “very important” in their lives, but only 41% say they have attended church in the last week.¹
- Although 41% say they have been to church in the last seven days, various weekly attendance records indicate that the actual number in attendance is closer to 20%.

¹ Barna Research, 2000

- Since 1970, the number of Americans who say they attend church every week has dropped from 38% to 25%.
- The number of Americans who say they never attend church has risen from 12% in 1970 to 32% in 2002.²
- 82% of Americans say they “identify with religion”, but only 11% call themselves members of a religious organization.³

In 1966, *Time Magazine* published one of its most controversial issues. The cover’s headline posed a simple question that stirred debate throughout the country: “Is God Dead?” Many scholars argued at the time that religion and the church were growing increasingly irrelevant and that sooner or later, our nation would become a secular nation.⁴ Today, those theories have been proven only partially true. Although participation in traditional religious institutions has dwindled over the years, an astonishing 93% of Americans say they believe in God. One possible interpretation of these data is a large number of people in American organized religion who are seeking meaning and spirituality in their lives, but they are not currently finding it in the church. These observations put the American church in uncharted territory. There appears to be an enormous but untapped potential for the church to reach out to the outside world. These observations also suggest a correlation between the declining relevance of the church and the emergence of a new worldview in American culture.

My thesis will examine the question of why much of society has turned away from the church and why traditional religious institutions have lost much of their relevance in light of society’s gradual acceptance of postmodernism. I believe the most likely answer to this question is that the church has failed to respond effectively to the understandings and perspectives of a postmodern society. More specifically, the church

² Falsani, Cathleen. “The Next Great Awakening”. *The Chicago Sun Times*. 18 March 2004, pg 16.

³ Wald, Kenneth D. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. (Washington D.C; Congressional Quarterly, 1992). Pg11

⁴ *Time Magazine*. 8 April 1966, vol. 87, no. 14.

has failed to demonstrate its potential relevance in the world. It has turned its focus inward on itself and neglected the needs of a largely unchurched, biblically illiterate, consumerist society. Furthermore, I will describe just why it is necessary for the church to adapt its religious practices in light of the postmodern age and demonstrate how such a feat can be achieved. My thesis will also, however, critique these practices in order to realistically evaluate how these changes have affected their church's relevance in society. Ultimately, I hope these findings will help the American Christian church to have a better understanding of just how much our beliefs and religious practices are shaped by the social situation we currently find ourselves in, and how we in turn, as Christians, have the power to positively impact a developing postmodern society.

Dealing with Change in the Culture

In *The Church and Emerging Culture*, Leonard Sweet sets out three ways to deal with social change.

1. Reactive – wait until change occurs before you deal with it; assume that while change is always occurring, the future will still be like the past; utilize crisis management.
2. Responsive – while change is occurring, get involved to do what you can; anticipate what is probably, and be proactive once you see the direction change is going.
3. Redemptive – get ahead of change and try and steer it; no one can escape the reactive and responsive, but learn to read the handwriting on the wall, utilizing futuring and futures research as prophetic professions.⁵

These three techniques greatly affect the success of any institution seeking to deal with change, but they are particularly applicable in the church, which is notoriously behind the times when dealing with social change. Brian McLaren says, “The world of religion has a way of sanctifying the last era and riding it until the next era is nearly over – a conservatism gives religion a bad name, as if God isn’t quite strong or wise enough to

⁵ Sweet, Leonard. *The Church in Emerging Culture*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). Pg21.

deal with today.”⁶ That conservatism makes religion and the church seem illegitimate among the more progressive elements and further alienates it from much of the community. Those who claim that the church should remain reactive and deal with change only when it has no other option make the argument that the church should not be held captive to the culture and should work autonomously. In many ways, though, remaining true to Christian beliefs and doctrines as they currently stand means remaining loyal to practices that are actually steeped in modernity and would have been called too radical during their own infancy stage. Those who take a more redemptive approach claim the lack of initiative from the church when dealing with social change has been the catalyst for dissent within its walls and communities. A more progressive, redemptive approach is possible to make the church more accessible and religious life more natural to a postmodern culture without sacrificing the Christian principles as the focal point. Sweet sets out several factors to consider in applying a more progressive approach:

1. Intellectually – Are we dealing with the loss of a sense of objective truth or a change in the understanding of what truth is?
2. Morally - Is it a loss of a sense of biblical authority or a culture of individualism and its morally thin creeds?
3. Culturally – Is it a loss of a sense of community and roots caused by selling out to culture or an inability to incarnate the gospel in culture? Should the church feed only on its own resources or should it draw from the world’s wells?
4. Spiritually – Is it a crisis of faith (creeds and doctrinal content) or a crisis in the language of faith (words we use to convey doctrine and creeds)?
5. Ecclesiastically – Is the church itself the problem, with structures not conducive to ministry and mission in this new world, or is the church failing to be the church, less true to itself than true to its time?
6. Authority – Is tradition to be valued as a tradition, and to what degree do we accord cultural authority to tradition? Do we colonialize culture under Christian authority or is Christianity a colony within culture?⁷

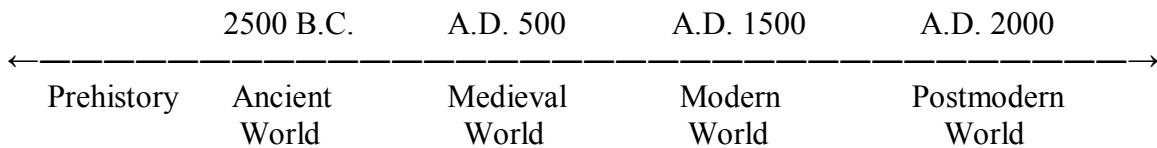
⁶ McLaren, Brian D. *A New Kind of Christian*. (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2001). Pg14

⁷ Sweet, 21-22.

These questions help to define the various aspects of the issue of the relationship between the church and culture. For those who strive towards the redemptive approach, which will be the main focus here, it is important to remember that the reactive and responsive cannot be escaped and will inevitably play a part in any approach to organized church ministry. With change comes great risk, but properly monitored and planned, it can also contain unprecedented potential for good. It is important to remember in these discussions that change within the church refers to the change of our history, not our heritage. There are certain aspects of the Christian faith that, were they changed for the sake of reaching a new culture, would cease to be Christian. When we talk of changing or adapting our practices within the church, it is safe to assume that we mean to change the language with which we manifest our faith to the world, not the core of our beliefs that actually make us Christian. Jesus, too, adapted the language he used to help a changing community make sense of scripture and faith. As society gradually heads into an era of postmodernity, it is important for the church to take a redemptive approach in dealing with the world's social change in order to anticipate the effects of the change and be a part of influencing the postmodern society and steering it in the desired direction.

Defining Postmodernity

In order to evaluate the place of the church in postmodernism, we must first have a clear view of what exactly postmodernity currently looks like in the world. Most scholars agree that the change from modernity to postmodernity is the single largest social shift in history, comparable to the change from the medieval era into modernity. Postmodernity is part of a natural progression on a continuum in terms of its relationship with the modern era.



The prefix “post” literally means “flowing on from or coming after.”⁸ If we think of postmodernity as a movement growing out of modernism instead of in contrast to it, it will greatly affect the church’s view and attitude towards a change into postmodernism. McLaren relates this to the Hegelian progression to assign each of the eras meaning and to draw out the relationship between them. He sees the medieval era as the thesis, an era of faith. From this era of faith came the antithesis of the modern age, an era of reason. Today we are finding ourselves in the synthesis of the postmodern era, a time when people are blending the eras of faith and reason.⁹ Being postmodern does not mean being antirational or antimodern – in fact, it means quite the opposite. The synthesis of postmodernism seeks to integrate rationality with those things that are beyond rational, things such as faith, imagination, mysticism, and the like.

The transition between the modern and postmodern eras in many ways mirrors the previous major transition out of the medieval era:¹⁰

⁸ Crouch, Andy. “Life After Postmodernity”. *The Church in Emerging Culture*. (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2003). 66.

⁹ McLaren, Brian D. and Tony Campolo. *Adventures in Missing the Point*. (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2003). 24.

¹⁰ McLaren. *A New Kind of Christian*. 46.

Figure 1.1: Major Innovations in the Transition to Modern and Postmodern Eras

Area of Innovation	Medieval → Modern	Modern → Postmodern
New Communication Technology	The printing press revolutionizes human culture	Radio and television, and then the computer and the internet revolutionize human culture
New Transportation Technology	Development of the sailing ship makes possible worldwide travel and exploration	The development of air travel leads to the trivialization of national borders and intensifies the interaction of world cultures
New Intellectual Elite Challenging Church Authority	Galileo, Newton, Bacon, and others give establish modern science	Postmodern philosophy challenges all existing elites and deconstructs existing epistemologies
New Military Technology	Development of modern guns leads to modern infantry and rise of the modern nation-state	Air warfare and nuclear weapons change the face of warfare and new forms of terrorism change the role of government in the world
New Scientific Worldview	Copernicus claims the earth is not the center of the universe	Post-Einsteinian theories of relativity and the expanding universe unsettle the mechanistic worldview of modernity; psycho-practices revolutionize how we see ourselves
Decay of an Old Economic System and Rise of a New One	Market capitalism replaces feudalism	The global economy transforms both communism and capitalism and e-commerce implies further market revolution
New Attack on Dominant Authorities, with Defensive Reaction	Protestant Reformation denies the authority of the Roman Catholic Church; Counter-Reformation develops in response	Secularism, materialism, and urbanism contribute to the decline of institutional religion worldwide; fundamentalist movements arise in reaction and self-defense

Figure 1.1 - (Based primarily on a lecture in *A New Kind of Christian*, by Brian D. McLaren)

This type of comparison helps us to understand the foundation of modern age and the principles that define the era, thus revealing the purpose behind its major principles, and helps us to see more clearly the direction that postmodernism is going.

Postmodernity, however, is still in its' infancy stage, still not fully developed, so there is tremendous opportunity for course adjustments on its path. Understanding the similarities in the social climates between the emergence of the modern world and the postmodern can only benefit the church in helping to forecast changes and problems that may be on the horizon. It also gives the church the opportunity to reevaluate its practices in light of an emerging culture in the world in order to influence the culture and its attitudes towards the church and traditional religious institutions.

An Age of Awkwardness

Our culture today is in a stage of awkwardness, stuck between the loyalty and comfort of the modern age and the onset of seemingly conflicting postmodern principles. Stemming from Sweet's six points of debate between modernity and postmodernity, there are four broader categories can be used to discuss the problems in the church's approach towards the culture and demonstrate some of the more sharp contrasts between the former and emerging era.¹¹

Objectivity

In many ways, modernity can be defined by its tendency to strive towards complete and absolute objectivity. The underlying principle here is that objectivity, or absolute truth, would ultimately render knowledge and certainty about the world and our

¹¹ It is important to remember in conversations of this manner that it is extremely easy to over-generalize statements and terms that are associated with an era or generation. For the sake of discussion, some statements and categories will be rather broad, but it goes to point out the differences between the two eras in order to find a commonality.

place in it. Along with this, of course, comes the notion that if there is an absolute right, then everything else is absolutely wrong. The trend in many aspects of postmodernism, as a response to this absolute objectivity, is to assume a theory of relativity. Each person seeks truth in different ways and through different means and ultimately, can find their own truth in different places. This seemingly ambivalent attitude towards “truth” has caused problems for the church when dealing with a postmodern society for obvious reasons. In the modern era, there was “the highest faith in human reason to replace all mysteries with comprehension, superstition with fact, ignorance with information, and subjective religious faith with objective truth.”¹² The church, eager to appeal to a modern society, bought into this line of thinking and tried to align its doctrines and beliefs with the scientific and rational standards of modernism. Unfortunately, as more of society has tended towards postmodern thinking, those who identify with modern principles are seen as elitist or out of touch with present realities and their claims or actions, no matter how relevant, are often dismissed without further investigation. With this kind of value system in place in society, it is easy to see why the church’s relevance has declined in American culture and why it has too often been discredited for being arrogant and narrow-minded. But, as Sweet asks, “Are we dealing with a loss of a sense of objective truth or a change in the understanding of what truth is?”¹³ This question deserves to be explored at length.

Secularism and Civil Religion

With modernity has come an increase in what most scholars can only define as secularism, a de-institutionalization of traditional religion and an increase in civil religion. Much of this secularism is attributed to the fact that the church has been

¹² McLaren *A New Kind of Christian*. 41.

¹³ Sweet, 21-22.

discredited by much of modern society because of its lack of scientific, proven methods. “With mechanistic and scientific views of the universe gaining hegemony and analytical minds swearing unyielding antipathy toward any invincible mystery that couldn’t be broken down into controllable parts (God, for instance), nation-states and their cultures rose above ecclesiastical influence”.¹⁴ Modern society has found a way to find meaning without traditional religious institutions, places where it can exert more control and which can be less demanding - patriotism being a prime example. Part of the transition from this modern reality to the postmodern includes possible counter-movements. In the case of religion, fundamentalism has re-surfaced as a defensive maneuver and has further alienated the church from an emerging society. For the church on the verge of facing the postmodern era, this means finding a balance between being an independent entity, not of this world, and of being an active participant in a society that is looking for an outlet in which to find answers and meaning.

“Should the church feed only on its own resources or should it draw from the world’s wells? Do we colonialize culture under Christian authority or is Christianity a colony within culture?”¹⁵ These questions from Sweet seem particularly relevant.

Individualism

With an increase in technology, as we see in modernity, and a growing field of psychoanalysis, we see an increase in individualism and autonomy. Never before has there been such an emphasis on personal liberty and freedom, especially in the United States. One of the major assets of the church is the community it offers to its attendees, but an increase in individualism as we see in late modernity actually poses a major threat

¹⁴ McLaren. *A New Kind of Christian*. 52.

¹⁵ Sweet, 21-22

to the relevance of the church. Individuals today are free from institutional connection and social constraint, but as McLaren points out, “never have they felt so alienated and isolated.”¹⁶ During this age of awkwardness where society struggles to weigh the benefits of individualism versus community, the church has an opportunity and obligation to present a viable option and the need for such an institution in a privacy-ridden society. “Is it a loss of a sense of biblical authority or a culture of individualism and its morally thin creeds?”¹⁷ This question needs further discussion.

Consumerism

More than any other factor, modernity can be defined as an age of consumerism. On the exterior, it would seem that the market economy has led to freedom, but the consumerist mentality has proven to be extremely limiting in many respects. The modern culture is one that seeks to fill its needs through its consumption, and that prospect of monetary success and forced the need for institutional religion and spiritual health to the background. Some churches struggle to stay alive, criticized for not “meeting the needs” of their members, while many successful churches thrive under these conditions by marketing itself to a consumer-minded public while watering down the message of the gospel with entertainment-driven programming and by turning its focus inward on itself. “Is the church itself the problem, with structures not conducive to ministry and mission in this new world, or is the church failing to be the church, less true to itself than true to its time? Is it a loss of a sense of community and roots caused by selling out to culture or an inability to incarnate the gospel in culture?”¹⁸ These will be examined further.

¹⁶ McLaren *A New Kind of Christian*. 85.

¹⁷ Sweet, 21-22

¹⁸ Sweet, 21-22

Chapter 2: Secularism and Civil Religion in the Emerging Era

One of the things that makes the Christian religion unique is that it requires some sort of active faith in an unseen God. A popular Christian song from the 1990's compared this faith to the wind: although we cannot actually see the wind, we can sense its presence and view the effects of it on the world. To Christians, although the actual person of God is hidden from view, it is possible to see the effects God and religion have on the world and it is possible to sense when one is in his presence. Many, however, especially in the modern era, have become quite skeptical about faith in an unseen God. An emphasis on objectivity scratches the surface here, but the real issue runs much deeper. Many scholars have noted the prominence of secularism in society and a concept referred to as civil religion. Perhaps it is a byproduct of an increasingly objective worldview, or perhaps it stems directly from the presentation of the church. Nevertheless, these concepts manifest themselves quite explicitly in modern culture.

The concept of civil religion refers here to the idea that the nation or country is virtuous and transcendent, the place reserved solely for God in a true Christian religion. The American people have had a tendency toward attaching the sacred to the secular, blurring the line between faith in God and faith in nation. Ronald C. Wimberly, in his article "Testing the Civil Religious Hypothesis", lays out a list of criteria on which he determined that America is, indeed, a civilly religious nation. The existence of American civil religion was based on responses to the following survey:

1. It is a mistake to think that America is God's chosen nation today.
2. I consider holidays like the Fourth of July religious as well as patriotic.
3. We need more laws on morals.
4. We should respect a president's authority since his authority is from God.
5. National leaders should affirm their belief in God.
6. Good patriots are not necessarily religious people.

7. Social justice cannot be based on laws; it must also come from religion.
8. To me, the flag of the United States is sacred.
9. God can be known through the experiences of the American people.
10. If the American government does not support religion, the government cannot uphold morality.

The responses Wimberly received in this poll indicated that there is a high degree of civil religion in this country and the American people do expect that their nation will fulfill a spiritual purpose.¹⁹

Why is America Civilly Religious?

As the responses to Wimberly's survey suggest, some Americans have turned to seeking meaning and deep significance in patriotic actions and the political landscape. One would observe that if people are not finding meaning and significance in the church, it is plausible that these same people would turn to civil religion to fill a void. If one does not find a community united in similar beliefs in a church, then that potential church member would look elsewhere and find that community in a different cause. Likewise, if the a potential member does not find true, authentic purpose and meaning by attending a church meeting, then that person will find these things elsewhere. In most cases, both of these potential members can find viable alternatives to the things they are seeking in some aspect of civil religion. The political landscape is filled with opportunity for members to get involved, join in community, find something they believe in, and ascribe great sacredness to people and things that are wholly secular. If the church in America continues to fail to provide these things through authentic, deep relationships with other believers and by demonstrating the sacredness and fulfillment of God alone, then more

¹⁹ Wimberly, Ronald C. "Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis". *Sociological Analysis*.37:341-352 – cited in Kenneth D. Wald's *Religion and Politics in the United States*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003) p57.

and more Americans will continue to be misled into thinking they can find fulfillment and worth in civil religion.

Implications of Civil Religion

Of course, not every aspect of civil religion is something that needs to be opposed from within the church. It is, indeed, important to recognize that America has been fortunate enough to maintain various resources and certain privileges not afforded in other countries. Kenneth D. Wald, a political science professor at the University of Florida, points out that in order “to be a constructive force in political life, civil religion must balance the priestly and prophetic impulses. In that condition, it can ennoble a people by prompting generous instincts and a resolute commitment to the nation’s principles.”²⁰ Ascribing significance to aspects of the civil realm (what Wald refers to as the priestly role) has the potential to inspire people towards good action, compassion, and legitimation. This, however, can serve as a means, but not as an end in itself. We must be careful, though, not to ascribe sacred meaning to these things, deeming our abundant resources and privileges as blessings from a God who has chosen America as His Promised Land and just enforcer in the world (the prophetic role).

Bordering on Idolatry

Patriotism and obedience to civil laws are biblically mandated principles, but taking civil religion much beyond that has dangerous implications. Most obviously, ascribing sacred virtue to the flag of the United States, for instance, borders on idolatrous worship. As evidenced in Wimberly’s survey, most Americans reverence the American flag as sacred and observe secular holidays such as Independence Day as religious ones.

²⁰ Wald, 63.

Here, the church has failed to demonstrate true biblical principles by failing to teach its congregations that there is something even more sacred than patriotic sentiment.

America's Foreign Policy

The downfalls of civil religion are even more evident when examining it in the context of America's foreign policy. Attributing a sort of absolute "rightness" to American action automatically implies that everyone else is wrong. This criticism has been made of Christian missions throughout the centuries, and now the same criticism is lending itself toward American foreign policy. When asked about American foreign policy, a Canadian thoughtfully, and bluntly, called it "a determined ideological and evangelical offense to redeem the rest of the world from its backward, sinful self."²¹ Many within the church hear this kind of criticism about American politics and want to turn a deaf ear, claiming that the church is above any political issue and that they are somehow immune from the criticism. However, the failings of the American church have contributed to the fact that leaders in American politics have taken it upon themselves to become the mighty voice and enforcing fist of God in the world. No one can blame our politicians for sensing a void and rising to the challenge to fill it – we have only ourselves to blame.

Counter Movement of Fundamentalism

Brian McLaren rightly points out that in every major transition between eras, there is an attack on the dominant authorities and a defensive reaction to that attack. In this case of civil religion, the religious authority has switched from traditional religious

²¹ Rawlyk, George A. "Politics, Religion, and the Canadian Experience". *Religion and American Politics*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p253-277. Several authors, including Wald, have also noted George H. Bush's and George H.W. Bush's invocation of God on behalf of America in Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan, implying that God's purpose is to gain a victory for Christianity through the defeat of Islam in these countries.

institutions to secular civil religious institutions. As a result, the fundamentalist movement has entered the religious realm, further alienating the secular and nonsecular worlds. This sense of polarization is dangerous not only to interfaith communication and cooperation, but to support and collaboration within the Christian community. Reverend Welton Gaddy, director of the Interfaith Alliance, notes that “Our future will either be marked by interreligious cooperation or a conflict that will weaken the nation and destroy the integrity of religion”.²² The rise of fundamentalism in response to this attack has led to the creation of such political institutions as the Religious Right, which despite individual interpretations of its success, has no doubt served as a catalyst in polarizing the religious community and the secular community.

Looking at Civil Religion in Postmodernity

The emergence of the postmodern era holds a great potential for increased relevance of the church with regards to the aspect of civil religion. Modern society has found ways to find meaning and relevance outside the context of traditional religious institutions, places where the individual can exert more control and receive fewer demands. The emerging culture, however, presents possibility for change. For the church, this means finding a balance between being an independent entity, not of this world and above its problems, and of being an active participant in a society that is looking for an outlet in which to find answers and meaning.

Perhaps it is helpful to think of the religious and civil realms in cooperation with each other, instead of in conflict with one another. The civil and religious areas can be considered the two arms of God at work in our country today. They meet at one, common

²² “Fight Over Faith”, *CNN Presents...*(television broadcast) 17 October 2004.

point, then reach in opposite directions to optimize the distance reached. Both use different means to achieve a goal, but each one also has its own tasks, responsibilities, and obligations independent of the other in order to meet that goal. The closer these two arms get to one another, the wingspan also decreases and the more opportunity there is for entanglement or overlap. Both are equally necessary and one is not more “godly” or righteous than the other, contrary to popular belief. It is vital for both to draw on principles that will sustain its religious values without hindering the other arm from doing its own work.

This model is helpful when considering how to integrate religious and secular society in the postmodern era. The Christian Right failed because they brought the two arms or religion and politics too close together, causing more conflict than productivity. Unnecessary overlap of the religious and secular is counterproductive to the goals of both sides. On the contrary, the church cannot expect to reach out to the world by staying out of or trying to be above the political sphere, either. Instead, the church must make an effort to take back its rightful place as the arm of God in matters of religious importance. With this comes the challenge of re-presenting the sanctity of the church and the person of Christ, ascribing more sacred significance to Him than to the American flag or the President. What follows from this is a respect and deep love for one’s country because it is also an arm of God, doing God’s work, without intrusion on the complete and proper role of the church.

Martin Luther King summed up this concept well when addressing American Christians in his book, *Strength to Love*:

You have a dual citizenry. You live both in time and eternity. Your highest loyalty is to God, and not to the mores of the folkways, the state or

the nation, or any man-made institution. If any earthly institution or custom conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to oppose it. You must never allow the transitory, evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God.²³

King understood the balance between civil authority and religious authority, but clearly articulates the dynamic of the balance between the two. A Christian's highest priority must be with God, and then to country. If the two conflict, it is necessary to side with eternity instead of time. King understood, however, the importance of working in harmony with the political system, practicing civil disobedience while serving the repercussions and properly challenging the authority of the civil realm. This demonstrates how the two can work together, instead of against each other in a kind of checks and balances system.

The American church cannot afford to be more exclusive or more inwardly focused by separating itself from the secular world at the risk of further alienating it beyond reach. With this model, the church can turn something potentially dangerous to traditional religious institutions into a tool that can effectively reach the world. With cooperation comes the benefit of shared resources between the civil and secular realms. With two arms spanning in different directions, each with a clearly defined objective and a common goal, a society that has come to distrust religion will be forced to stand up and take notice.

²³ King, Dr. Martin Luther. *Strength to Love*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). p128.

Chapter 3: Consumerism in the Emerging Era

It has become commonplace within modern society to speak of various institutions as “meeting needs” of an individual. From grocery stores to divorce lawyers, every type of business markets itself in such a way that will *appeal* to the most people. In a consumer society, shoppers look for what can give them the most “bang for their buck”, or at least cause them the least discomfort or financial setback for some regrettable but necessary task. In many instances, these products or services are not actually needed, but are marketed in such a way to make consumers believe that they will, indeed, be better off in life because of their consumption of the good or service. Everything from health clubs to airlines to clothing stores survive by convincing consumers that their quality of life will somehow be better if they invest a modest amount of their hard earned finances in this product. In a market society, the needs or wants of the consumer direct the flow of product manufacturing, as each business seeks to generate the most profit by appealing to the most people. If they succeed, the institution becomes a kind of “savior” for the consumer, catering to their every want or desire and providing something that the consumer can’t figure out how they ever lived with out.

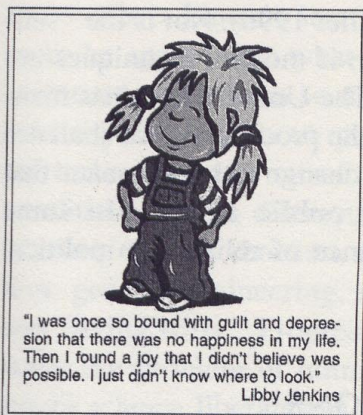
This strategy of marketing has proven successful in many aspects, especially in America throughout our experiment with capitalism. It seems that the church, notoriously behind the times when it comes to the surrounding culture, has now begun to catch on to these kinds of techniques, selling its marketability and ability to meet the needs of its members.

Market Economy and the Church

How does the church as a religious institution subscribe to market economy principles without selling a tangible product and without profit as a motive for attracting consumers? Churches today use at least three devices with which they market the benefits of belonging to a traditional church body.

- Make the convenience of the consumer a paramount concern.
- Cater to the preferences of each individual.
- Present an image of comfort and community within the church.²⁴

²⁴ Not every modern church subscribes to all of these theories, but they can be seen in many combinations and manifestations throughout the whole of traditional religious institutions today.



YOU CAN HAVE

- * YOUR NEEDS MET
- * FRIENDS THAT LOVE YOU
- * HEALING OF HURTS & PAIN
- * MEANING BACK IN YOUR LIFE

YOU CAN EXPERIENCE

- * CONTENTMENT IN MARRIAGE
- * FREEDOM FROM ADDICTIONS
- * REAL JOY IN YOUR HEART
- * THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST

Come to...



New Life

CHRISTIAN CHURCH

SUNDAYS
10:00 am & 6:00 pm

Super Kids
Children's Church
Nursery Available

Meeting at
The Radisson
2900 SW 13th St.
Gainesville
376-3777

25

Figure 1.2 – Advertisement for New Life Christian Church, Gainesville, Florida

²⁵ Wald, 15. Here is a modern church's advertisement, where we can see all three of these factors in play

Convenience of the Consumer

In the past two decades, the church's focus on the convenience of the audience, or consumer, has grown tremendously. The Church Growth Movement has brought increased attention to innovation in spreading the marketability of the church and bringing it to the largest audience possible in order to attract the largest attendance on Sundays. The advent of the mass media has made such growth possible and has opened new avenues for advertising and consumerist ventures, not only within the church but in all of the larger society. Focus on the Family has developed one of the most highly horizontally integrated ministries, utilizing television and radio broadcasts to advance the precepts of the Christian church. These types of practices exist within individual church communities as well. A multitude of church services are broadcast on television every Sunday morning to appeal to a varied demographic, and Christian radio stations provide bite-sized sermons and inspirational music that can serve as a daily dose of religiosity during the morning commute. No longer is it necessary for one to sit in a pew on Sunday mornings when the consumer can receive the same message through a more convenient medium, be it radio, television, computer screen, or cell phone internet browser.

Catering to the Preference of the Individual

Many churches seem to have found success through their ability to diversify their services, appealing to the tastes of many while presenting a similar message. Whereas church services used to be a family outing on Sunday mornings, we now see various services for different age groups, musical tastes, family styles, preaching styles, and disabilities within each different denomination. A typical week in a modern church could include several different worship services on seven days of the week, a class for each age

level and life stage, events for each area of the student ministries, small group meetings, prayer teams, worship teams, aerobics ministries, motorcycle ministries, and the list goes on.

By catering to the preference of as many individuals as possible, the church hopes to avoid excluding anyone who may feel that the church does not provide them with what is necessary to worship in an environment conducive to their own needs. Pastors frequently hear complaints about the style or volume of the music, the topic or length of the sermon, the amount of technology used in the services, and even the brightness of the lighting. It seems that there is an endless array of possibility when it comes to diversifying the product of the church to cater to the preferences of the consumer.

Presenting Comfort and Community

It has also been important in the modern era for the church to present a comfortable environment in which the consumer can worship and participate in a community of believers in a common God. This can be clearly seen in figure 1.2, as an example. Churches strive to appear non-threatening, a place where anyone of any background can come and be comforted without fear of retribution for any sin or prior offense. These churches' foremost concern is the community of its congregants, which provides an outlet for all areas of life.

The preacher has an important role in creating this atmosphere of comfort, as he is the most visible in the church and communicates most directly with the attendants. He has the primary responsibility of presenting a positive image of God, one which will fit neatly within the parameters set by the consumer prior to their attendance at the church. If

this image does not correlate with their need, the church, and God for that matter, become irrelevant in the life of that particular consumer.

The Problem with Consumerism in the Church

Certain problems arise when a religious institution enters the realm of market economy and consumerism. Although meeting the needs of a congregation can be important, it is also vital to the spiritual health of the congregation to balance the wants of individuals with the responsibility of the church to present an accurate picture of the God which we worship. By utilizing the marketing techniques of modern society, the church runs the risk, in the words of Leonard Sweet, of failing to be the church and being less true to itself than to its time.²⁶ By adapting the church to the wants and desires of the audience, the message of the church, the gospel of Christ, and the character of God are reduced to irrelevance.

Malise Ruthven, a noted author on religion in a consumer society, remarks:

As an institution, religion also seems to be grasped less for its truth than its usefulness. Congregations evolve from holy assemblies to community centers that provide good opportunities for networking and recreation. As the tools of marketing research are brought into the quest for church growth, church planners emphasize comfortable surroundings rather than divine truth as the key for attracting new congregants.” If the critics are to be believed, the quest for religious revival is transformed under modern conditions from a crusade for souls to a battle for market share. In the ‘divine supermarket’, of the contemporary United States, people are solicited to spend some of their precious disposable time and income in this rather than the church.²⁷

What exactly is the purpose of utilizing modern marketing techniques within the church? Is it to make religion seem more useful to a consumer-minded public, as Ruthven suggests? Or is it to bring the truth of the gospel to a disbelieving world by presenting an

²⁶ Sweet, 21.

²⁷ Ruthven, Malise. *The Divine Supermarket: Shopping for God in America*. (New York: William Morrow, 1989).

accurate and honest image of God and His church, no matter what the consequences? If the answer were the latter, the process of appealing to a consumerist culture would look much different than its current form.

The problem with this kind of marketing of the church comes when someone who has consumed the product realizes that they have been sold short, that the things that were presented as fulfilling and life-altering are actually empty promises based on something short of glorious and true. Sugar-coating the message of Christ only serves to backfire in the end and further deprecate the image of the church. Several of these marketing techniques are effective in providing an important aspect of the Christian community to outsiders, but it is important that these components be used as a way to experience the truth and character of God, not for self-serving purposes.

Experiencing God in a Relevant Church

In his book *Finding Faith*, Brian McLaren lists several ways to experience God that churches, and laypeople for that matter, simply forget about or neglect.²⁸ Among these are ritual, prayer, fasting, obedience, compassion, solitude, joy, and the most intriguing, suffering. In a marketing model, it would not make sense to advertise the value of suffering for a believing Christian, but it is, in many ways, one of the most important ways for a Christian to communicate with God.

In modern Christianity, the God of the Bible is too frequently portrayed as a teddy bear, and religion as the cozy product of his loving kindness and compassion. Portrayals of this view often neglect the more “negative” side of God in order to avoid making the audience feel uncomfortable or experience any type of unnecessary emotional persuasion. The suffering of Christ is paramount to the Christian story, and the experience of

²⁸ McLaren, Brian *Finding Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 163-197.

suffering is one way for a Christian to connect with God and to find meaning in life.

McLaren highlights one such story of a man who belongs to the church he pastors:

I have been through most of these dark, emotional places, places familiar to many who have CF (cystic fibrosis). Even today, it's easy to regress... My faith teaches me to look in and to look out. To look in at what's wrong with me, and to look out to serve others. This is against my typical proclivity to look out at what's wrong with others, and look in to serve myself... I don't know why God allows horrible things to happen in this world... In my own small way, I can do my part to make sure I'm not part of the world's problems, but part of the solution.²⁹

In our own suffering, we might connect with the suffering Christ felt on the cross, which is paramount to the Christian experience and the role we play in the ongoing story of God's kingdom.

The ritual of communion is an excellent way for a postmodern church to connect this message with a modern society that is looking for purpose. With an accurate demonstration of the story and ritual of communion, it is possible to combine the theme of suffering as connection with Christ while establishing community and meeting needs within the church body. As we enter a new era and adapt to postmodernity, the church must play an extended role in altering the way it presents the image of God and the church's role in his world. Appealing to the wants of a consumerist society only serves to temporarily guide people into the church's walls, whereas a more long-term approach gains believers in the strength of the world-wide church. Our churches cannot be reduced to drive-thru therapy sessions where God is merely an afterthought in the providing and consuming process. Instead, community, ritual, obedience, and indeed suffering should all serve as a means to experience God in a truthful light.

²⁹ McLaren, *Finding Faith* 182.

The love of Christ cannot be truly and honestly experienced in a church that is locked in a consumerist mindset. The relationships we have with people are typically thought of as a commodity – we “value” friendships, we “invest” in people.³⁰ Essentially, if someone is offering us something, we consider them to have value. But with the love of Christ, we lavish love and offer community to those who offer nothing in return.

³⁰ Miller, Donald. *Blue Like Jazz*. (Thomas Nelson, Inc.; Chicago, 2003) 205

Chapter 4: Objectivity and Reason in the Emerging Era

Driving down any road in America, one is almost certain to run across one of the following on the bumper of a passing car:



These two common images represent a truth about religion in modern society: faith is too often in direct conflict with reason. The fish has become a major symbol of the Christian faith, and with the advent of scientific discovery came the emergence of the Darwin fish, an attempt to poke fun at the Christian fish, and the Christian faith in general for that matter. Next came the Truth fish swallowing the Darwin fish whole, a symbolic statement of one side's superiority or "rightness" over the other, then the dinosaur devouring the Truth fish that was swallowing the Darwin fish, and so on and so on.

This tension between science and religion began with the Enlightenment, the time that many scholars mark as the beginning of the modern era. Prominent scientists such as Galileo began discussing theories that challenged church doctrine, and were subsequently branded heretics by the church because of their supposed contradiction with Biblical and traditional church teachings. Science and religion began to distance themselves from each other, and at times, peacefully co-existed and sought answers to life's toughest questions; science the questions of 'what' and 'how,' religion the question of 'why.'³¹ However, as science began to grow in authority, there was no longer room for an unexplainable faith.

³¹ Begley, Sharon. *Science Finds God*. Newsweek, July 20, 1998. 2.

Carl Sagan, an astronomer and atheist once noted that since the universe could now be explained through the laws of physics, there was “nothing for a creator to do, and a thinking person would be forced to admit the absence of God.” As technology increased, the span of the universe decreased, and so did the awe and spectacle of the unknown. Once scientific explorations were used to glorify God, but now are used to disprove his existence and to prove that human beings were capable of controlling their own destiny.

Sharon Begley points out that the religious are in no way above unrightfully discrediting the other side, simply because of some apparent, surface-level contradictions. A pastor once told her, “Unless you accept that the Earth and the universe are only 6,000 years old [as a literal reading of the Bible implies], you cannot be a Christian.”³² The religious accuse science of diminishing their mystical experience of God down to zeros and ones and their creation to a simple hiccup or a blip on the radar. Deeply religious people, perhaps rightfully so, feel robbed and stripped of their meaning and purpose in life.

Objectivity in a Pluralistic Society

Christians across the world have often been criticized for their seemingly narrow view of the truth. This is especially true in America, where people of hundreds of different religious backgrounds convene in a pluralistic society. Most Christians who firmly believe in their faith would affirm the fact that if they believe their religion is true, then inherently, any other religion is false. Within that argument, however, is the assumption that the falseness of the religion subsequently means that it is wrong and devoid of any truth. This is true when comparing Christianity and Islam, or when comparing Protestantism with atheism. The church has transformed Christianity into an

³² Begley, 2.

exclusive passageway to experiencing truth, beauty, and any other quality associated with an omnipotent God.

Missing the Point

It is possible that this is one key area where the Christian church is missing the point about the debate between objectivity and science, faith and religion. If we attempt to look at these issues with a lens that extends beyond the narrow confines absolutes, we will see an entire world of possibility and potential being opened up. Jesus taught not by directly answering questions that were asked of him, but by posing questions back to the person with whom he was conversing, challenging them to think outside of the box of absolutes consisting of only two options. The modern era has the tendency to constantly try to prove the rightness of Christianity, and in the process, the wrongness of “them.” As McLaren points out, we have a different challenge in postmodernity.

The question isn’t so much whether we’re right but whether we’re good. And it strikes me that goodness, not just rightness, is what Jesus said the real issue was – you know, good trees produce good fruit, that sort of thing. If we Christians would take all the energy we put into proving we’re right and other are wrong and invested that energy in pursuing and doing good, somehow I think that more people would believe we are right.³³

Experiencing the truth of God means so much more than being factually accurate about Him. The only way to experience His truth is to discontinue seeing outsiders with differing opinions as the enemy in opposition to the principles of Christianity and to begin seeing them as possible paths toward a good. These do not need to stand in conflict with the truth of God, but can actually help to strengthen our understanding of the nature of truth.

Objectivity and Reason in Postmodernity

³³ McLaren *A New Kind of Christian*. 94.

The debate between evolution and creation provides the perfect lens with which to examine the role of objectivity and reason in postmodernity. If the postmodern era truly is the synthesis of faith and reason, then postmodernity must provide some alternative to the absolutes we have seen argued. Many scholars are beginning to find an alternative beyond the rigid confines of absolutes that combines the theories of evolution and creation, allowing for the possibility that both theories can be equally right and equally good while affording a glimpse into the character of a supreme being.

Robert John Russell, a physicist turned theologian, decided in 1981 to found the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, a place which seeks to unite the practices of science and religion to prove the existence of God. He insists that the big-bang theory, which once refuted the existence of any form of a creator, now implies to those within the scientific field that there is a design to the universe. He also comments that “evolution... provides clues to the very nature of God, and chaos theory, which describes such mundane processes as the patterns of weather and the dripping of faucets, is being interpreted as opening a door for God to act in the world.”³⁴ According to some scientists, the further our community gets with technological discovery, the more it becomes apparent that there is an organizer behind the world.

Despite the observations that science may begin to support the idea of God, scholars also agree that science in no way overtly proves His existence. It is for this reason that these same scholars admit that although science does not need religion as part of the scientific process, religion needs science in order to survive in a continually disbelieving world. Learning about the world we live in provides clues to what God might be like, and the earthly creation is the only tangible manifestation we have to

³⁴ Begley, 3.

experience His character first hand. Russell continues his thoughts by saying that religion is “incapable of making its moral claims persuasive or its spiritual comfort effective unless its cognitive claims are credible.”³⁵ He also mentions that over 90% of Americans believe in God, but far fewer believe in a God that can part seas or create individual species. Therefore, in order to “make religions forged millenniums ago relevant in an age of atoms and DNA, some theologians are incorporating knowledge gained from natural science into the formation of doctrinal beliefs.” This type of incorporation of science and religion is necessary to fully understand God and to be able to present an omnipotent God and creator of the universe to a postmodern world.

³⁵ Begley, 3.

Chapter 5: Individualism and Exclusivism in the Emerging Era

Walking through any major city in the United States, it is easy to see how much Americans value privacy and individualism. The advent of technology has brought a decrease in one-on-one communication and people are looking for more excuses to avoid contact with others. Drive-through restaurants, online shopping, and e-mail have perpetuated the attitude that is common in America, that each person is autonomous and can live their life without the influence of others. While personal liberty and freedom is paramount to the American democratic system, it also poses some interesting questions and situations for the church as we head into an emerging era.

Individualism

The concept of individualism has so permeated our modern culture that the essence of a true community has been distorted. We talk about sharing our lives with one another and living in a close-knit community, but we put gates on our housing complexes to keep out unwanted visitors, build fences between our house and our neighbors, and more often than not, defend our right *from* something instead of their right to express. An individuals' right to express their individuality and remain free from the community of others may be *right*, but it doesn't mean that it is *good*, especially for the church.

The church's main contribution as a strictly social institution (excluding the spiritual obligation) is the community it offers for those within its walls. "Christianity, or faith, isn't meant to be done alone. Community is the most relevant thing we can offer the world, besides the promise of Christ."³⁶

Exclusivism

³⁶ Miller, 156.

As the modern era has grounded itself further and further into society, the Christian church has turned more and more inward on itself and started looking less towards the outside world for resources and options for evangelism. A common criticism of this trend is that the church has turned into an exclusive institution, a club of members that rarely allow an outsider into the fold.

Lakita Garth, a former Miss Black America, social commentator, and media consultant, made the following observations about our current state in the church:

When black people come out of the ghetto to the real world, they often don't know how to communicate or act in a manner that is relevant or meaningful to the culture. They throw up hand signs to communicate their heritage, speak in a language that is only comprehensible in their own neighborhood, and have basically become self-sufficient to the point that they are ignorant as to what is relevant in the outside world. Christians have become much the same. We have created our own Christian 'ghettos' with walls that prevent the infiltration of the outside culture. Instead of Ebonics, we have Christianese. Our language is so incomprehensible and irrelevant to the outside world that the good news of the gospel becomes polluted and misrepresented. Christians are viewed as dumb because we have failed to make Christianity relevant.³⁷

The individualism of those within the church has translated, in turn, to an exclusivism of the church as a whole – individualism on a corporate level. The Christian community and the institution of the church has become so self-sufficient and inward-focused through the products it generates that it is, in fact, alienating the very audience that it is attempting to attract. The Christian “ghetto,” although it may serve its own members quite nicely, serves only its own members instead of demonstrating Christ-like, sacrificial faith to a society that desperately needs it.

³⁷ Garth, Lakita. Lecture at Fireproof @ OASIS. 14 July 2004.

The Sacraments as a Tool of Incorporation

The sacraments seem to be the most likely way to demonstrate a profound spiritual relevance that is unique to the church and to unite a community of believers and seekers. Too often, the ritual involved with these sacraments becomes the act of worship itself. The concept of consumerism creeps in here, as the member of the church can come to see baptism and communion in a self-serving light. But in its truest form, the cleansing of baptism and the remembrance of communion are the purest models we have of demonstrating our corporate worship and community.

Baptism

Baptism allows those who take part to assert their own individual belief in front of a body of believers. With an individualistic mindset, baptism can be a very self-fulfilling symbol, cleansing oneself of guilt from sin and receiving a wealth of grace and forgiveness in return. This, however, does not encompass the full truth of what the sacrament of baptism is supposed to mean.

Although baptism serves as a public proclamation of faith on the part of the believer, the church also has the responsibility to emphasize that the act of baptism serves as an act of belief in the community of the church. In many churches, baptism serves as a rite of passage, as if somehow the symbolic act of cleansing makes one tidy or neat enough to be a part of the exclusive club. The body of Christ is not intended to be a place where those who are of like-mind and spirituality gather to reaffirm each other in their rightness. Instead, it should strive towards being a place where believers and seekers alike spur each other on in their faith and good deeds towards others, striving to strengthen one another and avoiding complacency by accepting diverse members within

its walls. The community cannot be complete without those who have not yet publicly proclaimed their faith. Those who express doubts serve an integral part to the church community because they sharpen believers with fresh perspectives, and are just as important to the success of the church as those who have already publicly pronounced their faith through baptism.

This kind of model limits exclusivism, which is dangerous to the church, because it is available to all only after one has become a part of the community. This puts the value of the community first and foremost, and the individual benefits of baptism that are so commonly associated with consumerist models in the background. Baptism is not a necessary step to joining the church community, so the individual has time for true growth and devout faith before publicly professing their belief.

Communion

Communion serves as another representation of unity in the church and between its members. It is another sacrament that has the potential to serve as an individualistic time of self-fulfillment, but can and should serve as more than that in a community of Christ. Community and communion both come from the latin word *communis*, meaning common. It is a symbolic act of service to other, representing the sacrifice of Christ, the tie that binds everyone together. In a Christian church, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is central and of primary importance. Communion is a time not only for an individual to reflect on its importance in their own lives, but for a corporate body to bow in worship and awe.

One of the hallmarks of the postmodern era is the synthesis of reason and emotion. An emerging generation seeks not only to know the facts of Jesus' life, death,

and resurrection, but also to *experience* the significance of it. The sacrament of religion offers the perfect opportunity to display and experience not only the story of Christ, but also to experience the effects his death and resurrection have upon our lives today. It offers individual reflection in a corporate setting, a synthesis of the best of both worlds.

In a world where so much is protected from our neighbors and virtually nothing is shared in common, it is important for the church to stand against the grain and provide a community where people can truly unite in the promises of Christ. People were not created to live life alone. Instead, God created people to live life together, deeply and fully to honor and glorify Him through His church in a community that is focused on serving and loving those that are outside of its walls.

In today's modern world, the tendency is to view the relationship between God and church much like the romance of Romeo and Juliet, two equals who are completely wrapped up in their undying love for each other that they can tune out everything outside of their beautiful and perfect love. In reality, the romance is probably more like the John Cassavettes film *A Woman Under the Influence*, a kind and caring husband who selflessly cares for his belligerent bride, despite the criticism of his family and friends. The church as a human institution will always be imperfect and in desperate need of renovation, but the goal is not necessarily to make it perfect. The goal, instead, is to let God's love and kindness show through the imperfection.

Our modern society will oftentimes view our obedience to God as a weakness, a sign that we are unable to live successfully on our own. Success in the world is viewed in terms of commodification, individualism, and intelligence, not in terms of love for God or

neighbor. “On both sides of the postmodern chasm there is an emptiness. For the church, it is a lack of radical, courageous, and sacrificial faith. For the world, it is a lack of proof that such a faith even exists.”³⁸ The church’s biggest obstacle, at the dawn of a new era and in the awkward age between modernism and postmodernism, will be to represent the power and strength of a loving God in a cynical world.

³⁸ McManus, Erwin. *The Church of Irresistible Influence*. (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2003) 56.