Reaching out without dumbing down

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REACHING OUT

without

DUMBING DOWN

A Theology of Worship for the
Turn-of-the-Century Culture

Marva J. Dawn

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
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2. Inside *the Technological, Boomer, Postmodern Culture*

At MTV we don't shoot for the 14-year-olds, we own them.

MTV Chairman Bob Pittman, quoted in *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media*

Inside, outside, upside-down!

Believers in Jesus are called to live *in* the world. We do not escape it to avoid its contaminations and problems, but from the *inside* we seek to understand it so that we can minister to its needs. Simultaneously, we struggle to be not *of* the world; we reject its values and stay *outside* its temptations and idolatries. To maintain this dialectical tension of being *in* but not *of*, the Church’s worship must be *upside-down* (at least in the world’s eyes) — turning the culture’s perspective on its head (thinking from God's revelation rather than human knowledge), teaching an opposite set of values (loving God and others instead of self), enabling believers to make authentic differences in the world. Looking carefully at this inside, outside, upside-down Church, Part II’s three chapters sketch a broad view of the culture that surrounds it.

Let us first clarify how the word *culture* is used in this book. Just as the biblical word *world* pejortively signifies values that are contrary to the
THE CULTURE SURROUNDING OUR WORSHIP

gospel and also means in its global sense the universal sphere that God loves totally, so the word *culture* can be used negatively or positively. The term negatively refers to an elitist exclusivism exhibited by high-art snobs. In its general, global sense, however, *culture* connotes every aspect of life that is produced by human beings (as opposed to what is given in creation). In a broad definition hinting at the term’s use here, Wade Clark Roof explains that

Culture has to do with making sense out of life and formulating strategies for action; and the ideas and symbols that people draw on in these fundamental undertakings are, implicitly if not explicitly, saturated with religious meaning. Religion is itself a set of cultural symbols.1

In this book I purposely use the word *culture* in several ways. In Part I it is meant ambiguously to invite you into deeper exploration of the relation of the worship of the Church to various aspects and kinds of culture. In this second unit of the book, I intend the word to signify aspects of U.S. society at the turn of the century, attributes of our world that cause people in this time and space to make sense out of life in certain ways. Part III speaks specifically of the “culture of worship,” the unique purposes for which God’s people congregate and the meaning of the faith worship symbols convey. Since that meaning is expressed in a mixture of forms that make use of the language, music, and art of the Church and the world around it, the word *culture* in Part IV conveys the peculiarity of the resources used when Christians gather together to listen to God and to respond. In the final portion of the book, the word *culture* signifies both the people not yet part of believers’ assemblies and also aspects of society that will be changed as God’s people are empowered by their worship to make genuine differences in the world.

All of these nuances of meaning will be apparent to you as you read. I list them now intentionally to move us away from the habits perpetrated by television, which forces its watchers to fix on picture images that are designed to stimulate certain feelings. A word, in contrast, has multiple meanings, which can cause us to reflect in diverse and extensive ways. Just as the worship wars are aggravated by a reductionism that simplifies things


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into two opposing camps, so our understanding of the relation of worship to culture is minimized if we do not ruminate on several ways in which that relationship unfolds.2

The Television Age

Certainly the most obvious aspect of the society in which we presently live in the United States is the ubiquity of television and its excessive power. The first chapter of this book has already referred to studies showing that children who watch excessive amounts of television develop smaller brains, but now we must look more closely at the far-reaching and deleterious effects of this preponderant influence in our culture. Even though I have thought and spoken negatively about television for years and have never owned one, I was not prepared for the horrifying expose of television in Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.*,3

Postman shows that U.S. society has not degenerated according to George Orwell’s *1984*, though Orwell’s prophetic visions have been fulfilled in some modern totalitarian states. Rather, television has taken over in the way presaged by Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. As Postman summarizes Huxley’s vision, “no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think” (p. vii).

Many of the scholars on whom I have drawn in developing this book comment on the destructive nature of television, which amounts, as Wade Clark Roof writes, “to a major transformation in mode of communication,” which has “had a powerful effect on how Americans ever since have

2. The aspects of culture sketched in this chapter are several that most profoundly affect the Church’s worship. For a superb discussion of cultural aspects to be considered in attempts to communicate the gospel specifically to nonbelievers, see William A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989). He focuses particularly on Americans’ materialist bias, temperamental optimism, and individualism.

defined truth and knowledge, and even reality itself." Few, however, have seen this so astutely and thoroughly as Postman, whose book is an inquiry into and a lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century: the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television. This change-over has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. As the influence of print wanes, the content of politics, religion, education, and anything else that comprises public business must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to television. (p. 8)

His recognition that even religion has to be recast in television terms forces us to ask in this book if and how we can do that without dumbing down the substance of the faith. As Part IV will show, I am not convinced that worship must cater to television-age crowds craving entertainment, but our efforts to be faithful, deep, and truthful and yet accessible to society will be improved if we painstakingly analyze precisely how television affects us.

Primarily we must comprehend that television has changed the way our culture perceives reality. Postman demonstrates that the technological process culminating in the television age began when telegraphy robbed from us relevance, power, and coherence. First it conducted us to irrelev­ance because it gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free information; that is, to the idea that the value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision-making and action, but may attach merely to its novelty, interest, and curiosity. The telegraph made information into a commodity, a "thing" that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning. . . . [It] made relevance irrelevant. The abundant flow of information had very little or nothing to do with those to whom it was addressed; that is, with any social or intellectual context in which their lives were embedded. . . . The telegraph may have made the country into "one neighborhood," but it was a peculiar one, populated by strangers who knew nothing but the most superficial facts about each other. (pp. 65, 67)

4. Roof, Seekers, p. 54.
Certainly this irrelevance is grotesquely amplified by the multitude of "news" and "facts" television now conveys. Consequently, people are inured to knowing only trivial details about each other. The effect of this on prayer and Christian community is easily surmised. Another more subtly dangerous result, to be explored later, is a quest for relevance that becomes misguided.

Loss of relevance led intrinsically to impotence. As Postman says, "most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action." Because we cannot do anything about the abundance of irrelevant information that we receive, television has dramatically altered the "information-action ratio" (p. 68).

Postman's explanations made me painfully aware of part of the reason why a four-month class I taught on Christian community was so woefully ineffective. Participants in the class told me frequently how much they enjoyed it, how much they were learning — but I wondered why not much was changing in our congregation. In my naivete I believed that most people put truth into practice, that we all seek coherence between what we know and how we live, that knowledge leads to integrity of character and life. Now it seems indisputable to me that television has habituated its watchers to a low information-action ratio, that people are accustomed to "learning" good ideas (even from sermons) and then doing nothing about them. Without doubt a television age requires that we reflect more deeply on how we teach and what we are really learning, on whether what we now "know" has any effect on who we are and what we do.

Irrelevancy and impotence were aggravated and complemented by the incoherence the telegraph caused. Postman explains that now we were "sent information which answered no question we had asked, and which, in any case, did not permit the right of reply." Moreover, telegraphy "brought into being a world of broken time and broken attention," as Lewis Mumford names it (p. 69).

The receiver of the news had to provide a meaning if he could. . . . And because of all this, the world as depicted by the telegraph began to appear unmanageable, even undecipherable. . . . "Knowing" the facts took on a new meaning, for it did not imply that one understood implications, background, or connections. Telegraphic discourse per-
mitted no time for historical perspectives and gave no priority to the qualitative. (p. 70)

Thus, besides being irrelevant and rendering us impotent, "news" became increasingly fragmentary, taken out of context, incoherent. This fragmentation was intensified by the invention of photographs, which perform

a peculiar kind of dismembering of reality, a wrenching of moments out of their contexts, and a juxtaposing of events and things that have no logical or historical connection with each other. Like telegraphy, photography recreates the world as a series of idiosyncratic events. (p. 73)

New technological imagery did not merely supplement language but replaced it as our primary means "for construing, understanding, and testing reality." Consequently, this focus on image "undermined traditional definitions of information, of news, and, to a large extent, of reality itself" (p. 74).

We were left with a world loaded with "information" that is meaningless because it has no context, can lead to no response, and has no connection to everything else in our arsenal of "facts." A turn toward becoming a people consumed by entertainment was almost inevitable, for, as Postman asks, what do you do with all the information? The crossword puzzle appeared as a first example of the fabrication of a "pseudo-context." Other uses for meaningless information are the cocktail party, radio quiz shows and television game shows, "Trivial Pursuit," and the like. These all furnish the same answer to the question, "What am I to do with all these disconnected facts?" The answer is, "Why not use them for diversion? for entertainment? to amuse yourself, in a game?" (p. 76).

Telegraphy and photography thus prepared the way for television to turn our society into a perpetual chasing after entertainment. As Postman avows,

a new note had been sounded, . . . a "language" that denied interconnectedness, proceeded without context, argued the irrelevance of history, explained nothing, and offered fascination in place of complexity and coherence . . . a duet of image and instancy . . .

Each of the media that entered the electronic conversation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries followed the lead of the tele-
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graph and the photograph, and amplified their biases... Together, this ensemble of electronic techniques called into being a new world—a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed, does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child’s game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo it is also endlessly entertaining.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with playing peek-a-boo... with entertainment. As some psychiatrist once put it, we all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to live in them. (p. 77)

Modern society began to live in them with the ascendancy of television (p. 78).

As its influence materialized, television revolutionized the structure of our thought. Whereas the printed page revealed a serious, coherent world, “capable of management by reason, and of improvement by logical and relevant criticism” (p. 62), television pictures the world in rapidly shifting images that destroy all the virtues formerly associated with mature discourse. Our “Age of Show Business” is not characterized by these facets of an age of exposition: “a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response” (p. 63). In fact, television’s “surfeit of instant entertainment... makes reasoning seem anachronistic, narrow, and unnecessary.”

The loss of exposition must be a major concern for the Church, which tries to pass on faith to the next generation, teach creeds, set out the eminent reasonability of belief, and ground children in doctrines that will duly establish them for growth to maturity in truth and hope. Without theological foundation, faith becomes subject to capricious feelings and to life’s troubles.

Besides extensively depriving our culture of exposition, television’s nature also intensifies the appeal to emotions. Its images distort watchers’ ability to reason and justify choices. Earlier advertisements laid out facts so that buyers could make decisions on the basis of qualities in what was

being sold, but by the turn of the last century “advertising became one part depth psychology, one part aesthetic theory,” and reason had to move elsewhere (p. 60). Thus television ushered in a major revision in methods. Indeed, an ad

is not at all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of products. Images of movie stars and famous athletes, of serene lakes and macho fishing trips, of elegant dinners and romantic interludes, of happy families packing their station wagons for a picnic in the country—these tell nothing about the products being sold. But they tell everything about the fears, fancies and dreams of those who might buy them. What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer. And so, the balance of business expenditures shifts from product research to market research. The television commercial has oriented business away from making products of value and toward making consumers feel valuable, which means that the business of business has now become pseudo-therapy. The consumer is a patient assured by psycho-dramas. (p. 128)

Church leaders must see how dangerous such a method is, lest we be tempted to let worship also be “market driven.” We permit that to happen when we study what the consumers/worship participants fancy more than we study what is right with God! Then worship, too, becomes pseudo-therapy and not the healing revelation of God.

The cultivation of the television age has enormous consequences for the Church. Will its attitudes and habits imperil the very work we do and prevent us from genuinely being the Church? Since television transforms the method by which people are persuaded of the “truth,” how will we inculcate the truths of faith? What questions should we be asking to ponder the means we use to be in the world but not of it, as we seek to appeal to the culture surrounding us?

The Technological Society

Television’s influence on our culture’s perception of thinking and truth is one of the drastic changes in the social fabric that have evolved with the onset of the technological milieu. More thoroughly than most, Jacques
Ellul fathomed these permutations long before they became fully developed. One of these deleterious transitions that is particularly critical for this book's purposes is the modern loss of genuine intimacy in personal relationships. Other repercussions will be considered in the next chapter because they are more aptly designated as idolatries in our culture that frequently impinge on worship.

As we consider various factors, continually remember that these are not the only elements of our technological society, but simply examples to initiate thinking about many others not named. Moreover, these factors are both symptoms and causes. Part of a never-ending spiral, they have arisen from previous technological developments and societal forces and, in turn, cause other factors that destroy our humanity. They must be named so that we can lessen their negative influences.

As Ellul traces it, the general social fabric of family and community cohesion began to shred in the Industrial Age, when family businesses and farms gave way to factories and corporations. Now the head of the house who went away to work in another place brought home additional psychological strains, numerous relationships that the rest of the family did not share, and extraneous concerns and realities. World War II escalated the process because women left their homes for the workforce outside. As human beings spent less time together with those dearest to them and more time in a wide variety of communities with superficial associations, they lost the opportunity to learn and practice skills of intimacy. A far greater rending occurred, however, with the onset of the technological society, because this new milieu's tools of work and toys of pleasure pull us away from each other. The automobile, instruments of the media, personal computers, and work modems are just a few examples of technological tools and toys that have stolen our intimacy.

Instead of riding on buses or trains, which provide opportunity for genial conversation and social connections, most commuters in our culture take their personal automobiles. Consequently, our society has

6. Much of what follows was gathered in previous research focusing on the works of Jacques Ellul and the nature of the technological milieu in light of the biblical doctrine of "the Principalities and Powers." This material will not be footnoted separately because Ellul's references to the subject are scattered throughout his vast corpus. Since my planned book on this subject is not yet written, I must simply refer you now to some of Ellul's works and my dissertation as listed in the bibliography.
not developed the connected intra- and inter-city transit systems that Europe offers—much to the destruction of our ecological and social environment. The automobile lets us live far from our birth families, distant from our places of work and worship, with the result that we inhabit lots of communities, few of which are truly intimate. George F. Kennan cites the automobile as a major "addiction" of our culture and asserts that it "has turned out to be, by virtue of its innate and unalterable qualities, the enemy of community generally. Wherever it advances, neighborliness and the sense of community are impaired."

The isolation engendered by solo commuters is also exemplified by modern architecture in suburbs, where the backyard patio is both a symptom and a cause of non-intimacy. The patio has removed us from the front porch congeniality that characterized architecture and community life in a pre-technological culture. As a child, I enjoyed evenings with my family on the front porch, where we conversed about our day's work and dreams and were visited by neighbors out for walks. My husband and I try to imitate this by means of a swing hanging under our home's front eaves, but few people walk by, we don't live near our closest friends, and the fences and hedges of yards separate us from those next door. Many citizens in modern Western society—pushed by extremes of corporate bureaucracy, the need to climb professional ladders, competition instead of friendship between business or academic colleagues, the frantic pace of the workplace, and many other factors too numerous to catalogue—retreat to a private home life to seek relief from the pressures and threats of work or the fears of random violence. And that violence is often symptomatic of the lack of intimacy and family life, of violent media entertainment, and of the prevalence of technologically sophisticated weaponry.


8. The patio points to Lasch's insight that the appearance of a new intimacy in present society is an illusion. The cult of intimacy conceals growing despair of finding it. Personal relations crumble under the emotional weight with which they are burdened. The inability 'to take an interest in anything after one's own death,' which gives such urgency to the pursuit of close personal encounters in the present, makes intimacy more elusive than ever." Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 188.
Besides destroying our thinking, as previously noted, television also fosters an easy — and mindless — subversion of familial intimacy. Instead of conversing, playing games, or baking cookies together, modern families often merely vegetate in front of the tube — and frequently in separate rooms with unshared program choices. The Walkman pushes this isolation to the extreme as it disengages radio or audiotape listeners from the sounds and ideas that others are experiencing and pulls the listener into a private, vicarious world — meanwhile often causing hearing loss that will lead to later lonely isolation.

I must emphasize at this point that I am not a cranky pessimist opposed to technological innovations. But we must be realistic about what Ellul names the "technological bluff," which blinds us to the mixed bag of positive advances and negative destructions connected with our tools and toys. Indeed, advances in technology bring us many advantages, but the advantages are always coupled with profound losses — primarily the loss of community. The computer is a good example. I am extremely grateful for how it eases the task of book writing — of which I am deeply aware since my first several books were typed and retyped and typed again. However, many workplaces have totally lost face-to-face communication because messages are sent instead over the computer modem. Families are being dismantled because a parent or child is always drawn away to play, work, or experiment on the computer. Confined to my home today because chemotherapy has weakened my resistance to infections, I feel profoundly the isolation of this machine. Separated from friends, I converse with you from my study — but I cannot hear your input nor see your face nor feel your handshake or hug.

Our culture's loss of intimacy has led to serious consequences. One is that many people desperately turn to genital intimacy because their needs for social intercourse are never met.9 Another result is vicarious living. Talk shows publicly discuss intimate, private matters. People unable to risk open vulnerability with those closest to them instead listen to, or participate in, programs that allow them to speak without revealing themselves or being held accountable to others who love them. Technological factors that reduce skills of intimacy keep many from knowing how to relate to their family and friends.

Societal and familial loss of intimacy affects the Church, too, in many ways. Living far apart from each other, members of a congregation do not hold each other as their primary community. Consequently, churches do not experience the deep intimacy that could characterize our times together. We might know some facts about each other, but we do not actually know who a fellow congregant really is, so we talk about trivia when we gather. We do not know how to share what genuinely matters, how to deal with the real lives and deep hurts or doubts of honest people, or how to speak the truth. Lacking sincere intimacy in congregational fellowship, we often put false pressure on worship to produce feelings of intimacy. (We will look at this in more depth in Chapter 7.) Alienated by the lack of true “public” worship, many people, conditioned by our culture’s sterility, prefer merely to attend, and not participate in, worship. They can get lost in a crowd of passive spectators or worship solely through televised services.

Moreover, the media have stolen our ability to sing together. Teenagers adulate rock stars and listen to their music on Walkmans and on MTV but do not learn to sing themselves. Television robs us of family singing around the piano, and the focus on technological training in schools has joined the media to destroy children’s interest in the fine arts of instrumental and choral music, poetry, painting, drama and dance, church symbolism and liturgy. These and many other factors lead to vicariousness in worship. Many churches utilize less communal singing and instrumental work and more solos sung to backup tapes. The lack of training in schools gives us fewer musicians to serve and less interest in retaining the repertoire of the Church’s master composers.

But the technological milieu’s influence goes far beyond its destruction of congregational participation and of the arts. Most dangerous are the idolatries the milieu engenders. Postman uses the term “Technopoly” to describe a society in which all forms of cultural life are submitted to the sovereignty of technique. Technopoly

10. I have tried to counteract this by offering concrete suggestions and questions for personal/congregational reflection in The Hilarity of Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992).

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consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfaction in technology, and takes its orders from technology. This requires the development of a new kind of social order, and of necessity leads to the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs. (p. 71)

Jacques Ellul named Technique a god and demonstrates, especially in The Technological Bluff, how thoroughly it convinces us of its supreme authority.

Though we will consider the idolatries of Technopoly more thoroughly in the following chapter, we should at least mention some of the assumptions of its thought world that are relevant to our topic here. These include beliefs

that the primary, if not the only, goal of human labor and thought is efficiency; that technical calculation is in all respects superior to human judgment; that in fact human judgment cannot be trusted . . . ; that what cannot be measured either does not exist or is of no value; and that the affairs of citizens are best guided and conducted by experts. (p. 51)

We will especially consider the destructiveness of the emphasis on efficiency later. The emphasis on measurement and experts is revealed by the huge push for worship practices to be changed in order to attract large numbers and by the turning of congregations into mega-businesses instead of Christian communities.

Boomers

Drastic changes in social fabric caused by the onset of the technological milieu are intensified by the psychological reverberations of societal events. For those growing up in the sixties — the “baby boom” or “boomer” generation — these tremors were extensive. Wade Clark Roof’s chapter entitled “When Mountains Were Moving” characterizes the age of the sixties as a time of great complexity, of nostalgia and optimism, coupled with world-weariness. 12

12. Roof, Seekers, p. 32. Page references to this book in this section of the chapter are given parenthetically in the text.

29
Roof cites Annie Gottlieb's suggestion that the age really began in 1963 with the assassination of President Kennedy and ended in 1973 with the energy crisis and economic recession. These parameters define the sixties as a decade of upheaval plus affluence. To these predominant influences Roof adds the gender revolution and the role of higher education and television (pp. 36-54). Such events and experiences during the critical years of becoming adults caused the character of boomer-generation members to develop in radically different ways. "Even the deeply ingrained cultural narratives on which Americans had for so long relied to make sense of their lives were deeply jarred by the events" of the times, and these "jolts reached to the very foundations of their religious and spiritual understanding" (p. 31). These jolts have enormous consequences for the Church today as it seeks to minister to this generation through its worship.

According to pollster Daniel Yankelovich, the affluence of the times led boomer Americans to ponder more introspective matters. Average citizens of the 1950s and 1960s typically asked if they would be able to be successful or to make a good living or to raise happy, healthy, successful children. In the 1970s, the questions became instead "How can I find self-fulfillment?" "What does personal success really mean?" "What kinds of commitments should I be making?" "What is worth sacrificing for?" and "How can I grow?"13

Significant for our purposes, this introspection has great consequences for boomers' relationship with the Church. They have grown up "in a post-sixties culture that emphasizes choice, knowing and understanding one's self, the importance of personal autonomy, and fulfilling one's potential — all contributing to a highly subjective approach to religion" (Roof, p. 30). Chapter 6 will focus on such subjectivism as we look at believers' character formation; here we must grasp some complex elements of this late twentieth-century attitude. Its roots lie in several factors of the modern technological milieu.

As detailed in previous sections, the development of modern means of communication has broadened, but not deepened, our experience. It is not local anymore, but universal. Our interests and influences are multifaceted, not focused. "What is most remarkable about modern people," David Wells observes, "is that they are not in scale with the world they

inhabit informationally and psychologically. They are dwarfed” with “nothing to give height or depth or perspective to anything they experience. They know more, but they are not necessarily wiser. They believe less, but they are not more substantial.”¹⁴ One result of such dwarfing is that persons can’t get their bearings from that huge world which they “know” but which gives them no “point of reference.”¹⁵

Wells blames modernization for the process by which our culture lost God as its point of reference.¹⁶ Modernization’s principal effect has been to break apart the unity of human understanding and disperse the multitude of interests and undertakings away from the center, in relation to which they have gathered their meaning, . . . by breaking down the central core so that there is nothing to which thought and life return. It has eroded those ideas and convictions, that truth which, precisely because it arose in God and was mediated by him, stood as an unchanging sentinel amid changing circumstances. . . . [T]his flight to the edges, this dispersion from the center, . . . has intruded on evangelical faith even as it has disordered the warp and woof of contemporary life. In the one it leaves a faith denuded of theology and in the other a life stripped of absolutes. . . . Is there not wide agreement that the effect of secularization has been to marginalize God, to make what is absolute and transcendent irrelevant to the stuff of everyday life?¹⁷

Not only did God become marginalized and irrelevant, but many Americans now find an open hostility between “the religious heartbeat of the country and the nation’s cultural institutions.” Sixty-two percent of Americans consider television hostile to religion, and forty-six percent think newspapers are.¹⁸

¹⁶. In his newer book (which came off the press too late for me to be able to include much of it here) Wells uses the phrase “the weightlessness of God” to describe the loss of understanding of who God really is. See David F. Wells, God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), especially pp. 88-117.
¹⁷. Wells, No Place for Truth, pp. 7-8.
Another factor in the mix of influences on contemporary religious life is that many people in the sixties were deeply shaken by events such as campus riots, Watergate, and the escalation of the Vietnam war, which put into question the trustworthiness of leaders and officials. As Roof explains, there is

a question of authority over which boomers are deeply divided. To whom or to what can you turn for reliable answers to religious questions? On what basis are religious beliefs and moral values to be organized? Whose truths are to be accepted? Such questions are vexing in a culture as pluralistic and relativistic as ours, and in an age when traditional authorities have lost influence. The answers to such questions are often divisive and emotion-ridden, and especially so if people try to “impose” their beliefs and moral values on others. Americans hold strongly to the rights of individuals to make their own decisions in moral and religious matters and resist such intrusion in the public arena. (p. 31)

These and many other factors cause the boomer generation to emphasize belief in themselves and their own inner strength. They value independence, but they are often frustrated that their achievements don’t match their perceived potential. They have a great tolerance of all kinds of beliefs and behaviors on the part of others, which is closely linked with their own ethic of self-realization, self-help, and self-fulfillment (pp. 45-47).

This (often excessive) search for self challenges enormously what we do in worship. Churches wanting to reach out to this generation must think carefully about forms and styles. As we struggle to ask better questions and to provide more effective ministry, we can be encouraged that many boomers who dropped out of religious institutions years ago are now “shopping around” for a church home. We must be cautious in our planning and changing, however, for the boomers “move freely in and out, across religious boundaries; many combine elements from various traditions to create their own personal, tailor-made meaning systems.” Choice, a significant contemporary value, “now expresses itself in dynamic and fluid religious styles” (p. 5). Roof summarizes that from his team’s statistical findings and individual accounts emerges a generation

of diverse seekers who share surprising commonalities. They value experience over beliefs, distrust institutions and leaders, stress personal fulfillment
yet yearn for community, and are fluid in their allegiances — a new, truly distinct, and rather mysterious generation. (p. 8)

How can the Church disarm that distrust? How can we pass on the objective beliefs of our faith that are true regardless of a person's experience?

Other attributes of the boomer society will surface in later chapters. As we tie together this chapter's first three sections, one blatantly obvious connection is the destruction of community and the recognition of its loss. Television brought home to almost every household the disastrous events of the sixties that diminished trust in authority. At the same time, it joined other media and technological innovations in decreasing possibilities for genuine community. The boomer generation increasingly lacked skills for intimacy and turned inward for personal satisfaction. Now a great number of people know that they need community and do not know how to create it authentically.

**Postmodernism**

Our overview requires one other set of descriptions of the culture in which the Church tries to conduct its worship and for which it seeks to serve. Though many other cultural aspects are worthy of our attention, those included in this chapter primarily affect the Church's worship life. We must particularly notice several especially influential developments that move away from modernism into various strands of postmodernism. Bear with me for several pages as we explore these attitudes and reactions that envelop our present time.

The term *modernism* as first applied to works of art and literature specified certain attributes of style, but often the word refers to the attitudes that underlie that style, which are the products of various factors in the technological milieu. In his momentous paralleling of modernism with mental illness, specifically schizophrenia, Louis Arnesson Sass lists the following attributes of modernism as it intensifies into postmodernism: 19

• its negativism and antitraditionalism as that is manifested in “its defiance of authority and convention, its antagonism or indifference to the expectations of its audience, and, on occasion, its rage for chaos” (p. 29);
• the uncertainty or multiplicity of its point of view, which can lead to extreme nihilism (pp. 30-31);
• modernist dehumanization in the form of “a fragmentation from within that effaces reality and renders the self a mere occasion for the swarming of independent subjective events — sensations, perceptions, memories, and the like. The overwhelming vividness, diversity, and independence of this experiential swarm fragment the self, obliterating its distinctive features — the sense of unity and control” (p. 31);
• modernist dehumanization in the contrasting form of the most extreme kind of objectivism. “Here human activity is observed with the coldest and most eternal of gazes, a gaze that refuses all empathy and strips the material world of all the valences of human meaning” (pp. 31-32).

To name the latter two types of dehumanization, Sass uses the term derealization and Heidegger's phrase “the unworlding of the (human) world.” He emphasizes that in both forms “the ego or self is passivized.” In derealization “it becomes an impotent observer of thinglike yet inner experiences — of sensations, images, and the like,” whereas in unworlding “it is transformed into a machinelike entity placed in a world of static and neutral objects” (p. 33). The chief characteristic of all the forms listed is disengagement.

From historical and cross-cultural standpoints Sass shows the correlation of increased schizophrenia with these social/cultural factors: weakening of extended family and small community ties in the transition from traditional rural modes to the more impersonal and atomized forms of modern social organization; increasingly specialized work roles and competitive expectations; the loss of supernatural explanations and healing rituals or reintegrative ceremonies; and the increasing “complex, conflicting, and potentially disorienting cognitive requirements” characteristic of more technologically sophisticated societies (pp. 359-65). He deduces that “the ways of thinking, believing, and feeling characteristic of modern Western society are prerequisites for the development of the reflexivity and
detachment characteristic of both the schizoid and the schizophrenic condition." This is caused by the disengagement and self-consciousness fostered by the ideas of philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant and by modern patterns of socialization, which turn human beings away from the search for an objective external order and enjoin us instead "to turn inward and become aware of our own activity and of the processes that form us... to take charge of constructing our own representation of the world, which otherwise goes on without order" (p. 369). Sociologist Anthony Giddens has highlighted the "unsettling quality of modernity's 'wholesale reflexivity,'" which has turned against not only all traditions but even "the nature of reflection itself, resulting in the dissolving of anchored vantage points and a universal 'institutionalization of doubt' " (pp. 371-72).

This description of modernity's wholesale reflexivity, of its rejection of objective vantage points in favor of what Martin Luther called being "inward turned," requires those of us who seek to reach out to people in the culture around the Church to consider carefully how genuine worship of God counteracts these tendencies. After his extensive analysis of schizophrenia and modernism, Sass asks these critical questions:

What, to begin with, does it say about modernism that it should display such remarkable affinities with this most severe of mental illnesses, which some have called the cancer of the mind? What does this parallelism suggest about how we should judge the relevant aspects of the modern sensibility? Can we view the alienation and self-consciousness of the modern mind as the inevitable signs of increasing degrees of complexity, subtlety, or insight or must we see them as something far less benign — signs of deep pathology, perhaps, of a disease or spiritual decadence corroding the style and sensibility of our age? (p. 339)

In future chapters we will discuss, as ways to counter modernism's madness, the urgent requirements to keep God as the subject of the Church's worship and to recognize the objective truth of God's revelation. At this point we simply note that one of the present cultural streams in response to modernism is a postmodernism characterized by a new openness to the past. This countermovement, according to Alan Mittleman, recognizes "the hubris and futility" of modernity's project "to conquer, control, and banish the past" and seeks instead "to allow traditions some
sware over the present and the future."\textsuperscript{20} Sass offers the possibility of this trajectory when he compares philosopher Jacques Derrida and literary theorist Paul de Man to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, who attempted "to put us back in touch with ourselves by recalling us to some deep sense of groundedness and unity" (p. 347). This trend offers great possibilities for the Church’s worship, especially with its twenty-centuries-long tradition of strong hymnody, scripturally grounded liturgy, and biblically formed community. One example in this country that gives evidence to Mittleman’s assertion is the recent wave of converts to, and renewed interest in, Orthodoxy — with all its ancient rituals and liturgy. Another example is the emphasis by the so-called baby busters (or Generation X or the twenty-somethings) on their own need and desire for ties with the past, for community, and for deeper relationships than their boomer parents have.\textsuperscript{21}

However, this strand of postmodernism is probably the least powerful, especially among the cultural elite. More highly visible is the stream of postmodernists who take the trajectory of contingency and relativity to a ruthless extreme. A baseball joke makes clear the progression in history from the premodern belief in objective truth to postmodernity’s deconstructionism. A premodern umpire once said, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I calls’em as they is.” Believing in an absolute truth that could be found, earlier societies looked for evidence to discover that truth. A modern umpire would say instead, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.” For the modernist, truth is to be found in one’s own experience. Now a postmodern umpire would say, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and they ain’t nothin’ till I calls ‘em.” No truth exists unless we create it.

Gertrude Himmelfarb describes this current in her own discipline of history by noting crucial distinctions between modernists and postmodernists, the


old-fashioned relativistic relativists . . . and the new absolutistic relativists. Where modernists tolerate relativism, postmodernists celebrate it. Where modernists, aware of the obstacles in the way of objectivity, take this as a challenge and make a strenuous effort to attain as much objectivity and unbiased truth as possible, postmodernists take the rejection of absolute truth as a deliverance from all truth, a release from the obligation to maintain any degree of objectivity or aspire to any kind of truth.

. . . Postmodernism repudiates both the values [truth, justice, reality, morality] and the rhetoric of the Enlightenment — that is, of modernity. In rejecting the “discipline” of knowledge and rationality, postmodernism also rejects the “discipline” of society and authority. And in denying any reality apart from language, it subverts the structure of society together with the structure of language. The principle of indeterminacy is an invitation to creation ex nihilo. It presents the historian with a tabula rasa on which he may inscribe whatever he chooses.22

Himmelfarb then goes on to discuss historians’ deconstruction of the “text” of the past and their creation of new histories. Since there is no objective basis for selecting one story rather than another, the only grounds for judging one as better than another are “its persuasiveness, its political utility, and its political sincerity.” Because of the race, class, and gender biases now prevalent, she asks, why not change “Everyman/woman his/her own historian” to

“Every Black / White / Hispanic / Asian / Native American . . .”? Or “Every Christian / Jew / Catholic / Protestant / Muslim / Hindu / secularist / atheist . . .”? Or “Every heterosexual / homosexual / bisexual / androgynous / polymorphous / misogynous / misogynous . . .”? And so on, through all the ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, national, ideological, and other characteristics that distinguish people? . . . [This has] the obvious effect of politicizing history. But its more pernicious effect is to demean and dehumanize the subjects of history. To deny the generic “man” is to deny the common humanity of both sexes — and, by implication, the common humanity of all racial, social, religious, and ethnic groups. It is also to deny the common history they were once presumed to share.

THE CULTURE SURROUNDING OUR WORSHIP

Traditional historians, even many radical historians, are troubled by the prospect of a history so pluralized and fragmented that it lacks all coherence and focus, all sense of continuity, indeed, all meaning.

From a postmodernist perspective, this is all to the good, for it destroys the “totalizing,” “universalizing,” “logocentric,” “phallocentric” history that is said to be the great evil of modernity. Postmodernism proposes instead to privilege “aporia”—difference, discontinuity, disparity, contradiction, discord, indeterminacy, ambiguity, irony, paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity, chaos.23

I quote Himmelfarb at length because her observations show the effects on public life of the loss of a common history. I believe that the Church offers great gifts in its potential ability to honor diversities of history, gifts, race, class, and gender, in the unity of the Spirit and our common history as Christians. But does our worship teach such unity, a sense of our commonality in Christ, and an Absolute that can put all relativities into harmony? In response to the postmodern rejection of all authority and reliability, can the Church offer believable truth, a coherent story that gives meaning in chaos?

We must look at three other strands of contemporary attitudes that arise as responses to the struggle for hope in the midst of the escalating suffering of the present-day world. In reaction to the enormous problems endemic to postmodern culture, Christiaan Beker observes extremes of cynicism and false apocalyptic hopes, as well as attempts (often narrowly privatized) at a middle way. Reflecting on the severity of the suffering, Beker underscores that

both the quantity and quality of suffering in our world threaten to overwhelm us in such a measure that it seems to evaporate any reasonable basis for hope or at least any reasonable connection between the cycles of individual failure and success, between suffering and hope.24

Suffering thus causes many to turn either to “despair and hopelessness” or to “repression, avoidance, and denial.” Those who still cling to hope often “conceive of it in highly egocentric ways,” such as when people invest in

expensive and private survival technology or "when religious folk among us devise fantasies of heavenly bliss for the few who are chosen." Such activities or plans are designed to avoid any contamination by the realities of our world's suffering.

These extreme reactions are generated because "the spatial and quantitative dimension of suffering [in our time], its worldwide scope, reinforces its qualitative dimension, its experienced intensity." Having himself experienced the horrors of Nazi labor camps and proximity to his own death in war, Beker astutely analyzes our culture's reactions to adversities.

Indeed, however much we attempt to repress modern questions about suffering and hope, and however much we are sick and tired of the prophets of doom and gloom in our culture, we simply cannot avoid questions about the unparalleled scope and intensity of suffering in our time. The usual response in our culture to these questions seems to be twofold: we repress hope and become cynics or we repress suffering and become credulous ideologues, happily swallowing the images of false hope produced by apocalyptic prophets of doom and by ecclesial and secular technocrats. And when we seek the middle way between cynicism and credulity, we often strive to create private, danger-free zones and egocentric projects of survival.25

The loss of hope and cynicism Beker names take many forms in contemporary U.S. culture. Graeme Hunter discusses luck, evil, and victimhood as expressions of this new fatalism. As he insists, "They are what remains in lives when every hope of finding objective meaning is removed."26 The immense popularity of lotteries, the horrifying escalation of random violence, and the proliferation of media "victim talk" all point to postmodernistic despair.

No one denies the immensity of our world's problems. What can the Church offer in the face of them, in contrast to postmodernist despair? How does our worship deal with the intensity and scope of suffering? Do we proclaim true hope, universally accessible? Are we equipped by our worship to work to ease suffering and to build peace and justice in the world? Or do we merely provide a private happiness, a cozy comfortableness in our own safe sanctuaries?

Before we can start to look at the true hope the Church has to offer and the ways in which we can offer it, we must look at the idolatries that threaten the integrity of our Christian communities. These idolatries are inextricably connected to the aspects of the culture outlined in this chapter, but, even more important, they are the products of the workings of the principalities and powers that try to separate us from the love of God.
3. Outside the Idolatries of Contemporary Culture

Jesus calls us from the worship
Of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us,
Saying, "Christian, love me more."

Cecil F. Alexander, 1823-1895

To be in the world but not of it requires the Church both to understand the surrounding culture and to resist its idolatries. Whereas the previous chapter sketched some key factors in the technological, boomer, postmodern culture that force us to ask better questions about how to conduct worship that reaches out to persons in such a world, this chapter warns against dangers of which we must be aware lest their power take us captive. As Walter Brueggemann makes clear in Israel's Praise, the worship of God's people is praise, not only toward God, but also against the gods.1

My first impetus for writing this book was the anguish of looking for a congregation and discovering, to my great distress, how extensively

society's idolatries have invaded the Church and its worship. Previous study had alerted me to the workings of the biblical "principalities and powers" in the modern technological society — but what this chapter observes does not really depend on focused research. Anyone can notice the flourishing of idolatries both in society and in the Church if one pays attention to them. But are the leaders and worshipers in our churches paying attention? Or are we so captivated by our own gods that we are blinded to their influence?

The God of Efficiency

The escalating disruption of intimacy and community chronicled in the previous chapter is augmented by the technological society's idolatry of efficiency. Our culture is characterized by an enormous push to do everything faster. We want faster vehicles, computers, and cooking equipment. We must solve all our problems with an instant technological fix. Things must be on time. The press for efficiency is compounded by the media, which continue to accelerate the speed of life as news reports get shorter and less substantive, commercials get more hyped, the bombardment of sensory impressions increases in velocity. Recently, in an attempt to find healing laughter to combat cancer, we watched an old Burns-Allen television program on video and were astounded at the slow pace of the commercials. No one accustomed to contemporary society's speed would tolerate such a languorous advertisement. Because the Church seeks to minister to people formed by the technological milieu, it easily succumbs to its principal criterion of efficiency.

When this technological mind-set invades the Church, it can be extremely destructive of true worship in multiple ways — especially if we "must" finish the worship service in an hour. The liturgy becomes clockwork, service elements are eliminated, free expression of praise is stifled, the sermon is cut so brief that no deep biblical explication can occur, hymn verses are chopped off, the Eucharist becomes less communitarian, and there is no time for common prayer and sharing of concerns and thanksgivings. Worst of all, there is no time for silence or the surprising workings of the Holy Spirit.

Second, the bombardment of hyped media impressions creates the need for worship to be similarly "upbeat." There is no place for sorrowful hymns of repentance, mourning dirges for a crucified Savior, despairing
cries for hope in the troubles of life, contemplative anthems that call for deeper thinking. The speed of the technological society easily invades all our worship tempos. Many musicians think that the only way to make hymns interesting is to play them faster. When we rush through worship too hastily, the music is sung and the words are spoken so quickly as to preclude much attention to meaning. We lose the majesty of many hymns, the moving paths of the laments of Lent, the profound significance of the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed, the lessons that can be gained by close listening to a slow-paced reading of the Scriptures.

Third, a need for efficiency in “fellowship time” between worship and Sunday school eliminates time for caring. Fellowship becomes a mere matter of coffee and cookies in the narthex between events. Some churches try to deepen these moments by calling them koinonia (the Greek word for sharing in common), but it is the same coffee and cookies! We talk about the weather and the latest ball scores, but we don’t understand each other as if we belonged to each other, and we don’t really want to know the answer to “How are you?” If our worship practices create the sense that the things of God must be tightly timed, this efficiency increasingly destroys our relationships with each other within the Body of Christ. It augments our tendency to think that we don’t have enough time to provide transportation for the elderly, to listen to others’ concerns, to welcome the child who needs to learn that she is also an important part of Christ’s Body.

Above all, the technological society’s push for efficiency has robbed most congregations of the Sabbath rhythm, the setting apart of one day in every seven for ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting, a whole day set apart for God and for each other, a day of delight and healing. Consequently, Christians mimic the frantic lifestyle of the world around them and have no understanding that God has designed a wonderful rhythm of rest and work, of refreshment and then response. In that rhythm, we don’t have to rush out of the worship service at precisely noon, since there is no work to do on Sunday. The day is set apart for worship, for relationships, for growing in our sense of who God is and who we are as individuals desiring to become like Jesus and as a community of his people displaying his character to the world.²

². For a thorough explication of the delights of such a day see my book Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).
A last instance, intended to lead to personal and communal reflection on examples in your own local situation, is that worship planning and preparation are subjected to the need for efficiency. Pastors are burdened with so much “administrivia” that they have no time to focus, as Acts 6:4 suggests, on prayer and the ministry of the Word. (This change is indicated by the fact that we call their places of work “the office” instead of “the study.”) Seminaries spend less time teaching about worship and the heritage of the Church because of all the other curricula demands concerning the mechanics of running a congregation. George Barna, who researches marketing trends, insists that clergy need to keep up with the latest technological developments to use computers and media well in the parish. “Church leaders must be technologically literate,” he proclaims, and he adds that “the very fact that the congregation is using the new technology sends an important signal to the surrounding community.”

Should we not be more concerned to send to the culture around us the important signal that our worship leaders spend their time in personal spiritual preparation, deep study of the Scriptures, and the inefficient work of prayer? Instead, worship — which should and must be the most important work of the Church — gets planned and carried out with less prayer underneath it, inadequate reflection on the texts, little care, minimal substance, and clocked efficiency.

The Idolatry of Money

Closely related to the demands of efficiency is the idolatry of money in our culture and in our churches. Many congregations are divided by arguments over various ways to spend their limited money — a congregation can be split over color choices for new carpet (which really ruins the acoustics of the sanctuary anyway!) — and money becomes more and more limited as lifestyle “needs” take more of parishioners’ incomes. Very few congregations and members recognize the biblical priority of worship and the poor in their budgets.

The Jews were commanded (and the Book of Acts shows that early Christians followed their model) to use their tithes for celebrations, caring...
for the poor, and paying the professional Levites, priests, and musicians (Deut. 14:22-29). I don't know many congregations in which all the members actually tithe, and I know no churches that spend their tithes biblically. Among the Jews, buildings and accoutrements were all extra gifts, gladly given (see Exod. 35:4-36:7). Think of the musical experiences that could happen in our churches if we spent more to pay good church musicians. Very few parishes have well-paid musicians, and yet music is a major part of the worship experience!

In the world's financial terms, I actually can't afford to be the choir director in my local parish — the pay doesn't cover the amount of time it takes to plan and practice good music — but because my husband's job frees us to give away my income anyway, I can enjoy spending time preparing choir, congregational, and instrumental pieces and special music festivals. I am constantly frustrated, however, that my availability to do such things is so limited because I am gone half the time for speaking engagements. Nevertheless, the situation makes me realize why many congregations have poor music. There is no financial and time commitment to making worship the varied musical experience it must be to evoke a sense of God's majesty, sublimity, and transcendence.

Consequently, the "Paul Manz Institute of Church Music" has been founded to encourage support for a new generation of organists. In The Christian Century Martin Marty exclaims, "Such support is urgent, given the barbarianism of our times, churches' frequent preference for mediocre music, and the financial difficulties of would-be musicians and congregations."4

A closely related problem with the power of Mammon is that, when church budgets decline, many parishes turn in the wrong direction to overcome the deficit. They push to make worship "attractive" and "popular" in order to appeal to the unsaved public and draw them to our churches. Often, leaders of this movement water down the faith to make it more palatable — and thus contradict the teaching of Jesus, whom the Church is supposed to be following. The gospel is indeed attractive to the unsaved, but we cannot sow it in shallowness if we want to reap deep discipleship. Besides, the Church cares for the unsaved for their sake, not for the sake of churches' monetary gain.

THE CULTURE SURROUNDING OUR WORSHIP

Most movements to attract new members emphasize an appeal to the tastes of the public, stressing that music should be like that found in the outside world and that sermons should minister to worshipers' "felt needs." However, the best research calls for an opposite approach. Benton Johnson, Dean Hoge, and Donald Luidens draw this conclusion from their extensive studies of reasons for churches' decline:

The underlying problem of the mainline churches... is the weakening of the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal life. Somehow, in the course of the past century, these churches lost the will or the ability to teach the Christian faith and what it requires to a succession of younger cohorts in such a way as to command their allegiance. In response to the currents of modernity, denominational leaders... did not devise or promote compelling new versions of a distinctively Christian faith. They did not fashion or preach a vigorous apologetics.

... Many of them have reduced the Christian faith to belief in God and respect for Jesus and the Golden Rule, and among this group a growing proportion have little need for the church.

Perhaps some now unforeseen cultural shift will one day bring millions of baby boom dropouts back to the mainline churches. But nothing we discovered in our study suggests the likelihood of such a shift. If the mainline churches want to regain their vitality, their first step must be to address theological issues head on. They must... provide compelling answers to the question, "What's so special about Christianity?"

How will we teach Christianity's specialness if the music in our worship services imitates the superficiality and meaninglessness of the general world and our sermons talk about subjects that those in the pew can learn from psychologists, sociologists, and the local television station? I am very interested in using modern music, as future chapters will demonstrate, but our music must contain the substance of the faith, the heritage of the Church's uniqueness, the character-forming truths of Christianity. Similarly, our sermons must be focused on the Word of God, which is the "special" domain of Christianity. Our worship services ought not to be designed by what appeals to the masses in order to survive financially;

rather, they must be planned in a genuinely worshipful way that invites persons into the essence of truthful Christianity.

The Idolatry of “the Way We’ve Always Done It Before”

On the opposite pole of trying too hard to appeal to the masses and consequently losing the substance of the faith is the idolatry of traditionalism, which causes us to do everything as it’s always been done, to such an extent that worship remains boring and stale. New wine must indeed be put into new wineskins; to try to nurture revival and to be genuinely open to the new movements of the Spirit require that we not be stuck to old forms that have no life.

This idolatry is not well combated by throwing everything out, however, for there is a great need for continuity in the human psyche; so we must be aware of the danger of swinging the pendulum entirely to the contrary pole. Once again, the dialectics about which we must carefully think require rigorous consideration of both extremes and the many possibilities lying in between.

The God of Vicarious Subjectivism and the Idolatry of “Famous People”

The problem of “attraction” concerns far deeper issues than simply choosing the wrong methods to appeal to the non-Christian or the non-active Christian. At its root is the modern compulsive “need” to be entertained. In the previous chapter this subject was broached by Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, so I need not belabor the point here, but we should at least note some of the other factors that create this craving for excitement in our society.

I do not intend to give here a definitive explanation; I simply want to paint the general social fabric with some broad brush strokes. As already mentioned, television’s constant bombardment leads to personal psyches and a whole milieu that demand constant hype, and children who watch television excessively have smaller brains and are less capable of sustained attention. Moreover, both television and the teaching patterns of many schools destroy children’s powers of imagination and creativity.
Much deeper than these factors is our society's loss of a spiritual center. Too many children, teens, and adults don't have any purpose for their lives. They are bored because of a severe lack of meaning, and they are unable to see possibilities for finding it in chores and home activities and jobs and care for others. Many have turned to the accumulation of material possessions as a way to find meaning, but this, too, proves to be empty in the end. As Graeme Hunter asks,

Can we really expect to wrest a sense of value from our crushing defeat by stubbornly esteeming things that, in truth, are valueless? In the end even this will-to-meaning seems futile. Loud exhortations to value the valueless seem unlikely to keep us from suspecting that our lives are in reality not merely unworthy, but absurd.  

Few have mentors to guide them in discovering values that matter. Meanwhile, the media deluge us all with images of violence and sexual immorality and materialism, all of which draw us as easy alternatives to our boredom.

All these factors combine, moreover, to make life terribly superficial. Lacking genuine intimacy, many people are desperate to "experience" real life but don't know how to go about it. They have not learned to appreciate the intricacies of symphonic or chamber music, the profundity of genuine works of art, the complexity of classical literature, dramatic mysteries, poetic sublimities, simple and deep delights in nature, scientific wonders, the careful workmanship of crafts, the discipline of playing an instrument, the exquisite pleasure of learning. When I was a child all these things fascinated me, captivated me, filled my hours with vast enjoyment. Now the students in my husband's fifth-grade class are cynical and bored. Most of them have no desire to learn. They spend their recesses fighting with each other, and they cannot treat each other with common civility. Television has made them passive about learning and aggressive about relationships; it has taught them to be rude, to demand their "right" to be constantly entertained without any effort on their part.

Consequently, many people in our society live vicariously. They tune into Walkmans instead of learning to play the piano, escape into pulp literature instead of conversing. They don't experience art or nature, but

simply take a photograph and walk on. Joey Horstman describes this crudely to shock us into paying attention to, and doing something about, the destructiveness of it all.

Modern technology and media have proved to be Valium for our leisure time. They have turned the United States into a nation of spectators, more eager to watch life than to participate in it. We want our art, for instance, to provide distraction rather than require concentration, asking it for either escape or knee-jerk political messages. We want shock or sleep. Period.

Perhaps Jean Baudrillard is close to the truth after all when he characterizes ours as the age of simulation. For just as shopping malls simulate the great outdoors, replacing sun and trees with fluorescent lights and green plastic "plants," we simulate danger with amusement-park rides, friends or enemies with talk-radio hosts, rebellion with torn jeans and black boots, sex with lewd phone conversations, revolution with improved fabric softeners, and freedom with the newest panty liner. We simulate real life by eliminating risk and commitment, and end up mistaking what is real for what is only artificial. We exist, that is, encased in a giant cultural condom.

This vicariousness is highly subjective. Everything is directed to the self; one's own ego determines the value of everything. There is little sense of an objective world that offers us gifts to be appreciated as undeserved treasures and of an objective God whose creative grace invites our response.

Recently Myron and I spent my birthday at the Portland zoo, which, among other wonders, features an extraordinary glass house of African birds. In my wheelchair I sat astounded by the birds of many shapes and colors and habits. Because of my visual handicaps, Myron pointed out to me various things that I couldn't see and helped me locate what I couldn't find. We tried to share with others our interest in what we were seeing and hearing, but all sorts of people walked into the building, spent two minutes, and hurried out. They missed everything that could be caught with a little silence, some reflective waiting, and the sharing of community. But they had "done" the zoo — efficiently.

We can observe the same patterns and habits in some congregations.