

THE DECLINE OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY AND THE
RELUCTANCE TO EMBRACE CONTEXTUAL WORSHIP

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Introduction

In April, 2009 *Newsweek Magazine* published an article titled “The End of Christian America.” The catalyst for Newsweek’s dramatic proclamation was the release of the American Religious Identification Survey. The survey revealed a ten percent increase, from 1990 to 2008, in self-identified Christians who now claim no religious affiliation of any kind. The religious affiliation with the greatest piece of this pie is the Roman Catholic Church with thirty five percent.¹ The survey put a qualitative stamp on a perception held by many Christian authors and denominational leaders.

The proportionately high numbers of Roman Catholics choosing to leave the church draws attention to the concern over contextual worship style. The affiliation with the most declines is also the environment with the most liturgical worship style. Contextual worship is not a catch phrase from the new emerging church culture it is a passionate plea from the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Paul shares his heart for contextual worship style. “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the

¹ Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey” (Summary 2009) http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf (accessed October 7, 2009) 13.

weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”²

Proclaiming the Gospel in a context in which the unbelievers in Corinth could relate was not an option to Paul. The American church has imposed a time warped, broad brush worship style on a hurting nation of believers and unbelievers alike for at least five decades, and it is resulting in an ever-increasing number of people deciding that Christianity is irrelevant in their lives. American Christianity is in decline, is it because the church has been reluctant to embrace contextual worship styles?

The Decline of American Christianity

Reggie McNeal clearly articulated the state of American Christianity. “The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order.”³ Church decline is certainly not limited to recent history. American church attendance has lingered around forty percent since the late 1970’s. Even that number could be lower because it is believed that many Americans lie about their church participation. The fact that most towns do not have enough churches to accommodate forty percent of the population cannot be ignored. McNeal recalled a friend who contacted every church in his town following Easter Sunday 2001, and reported a mere twenty

² Unless otherwise noted all Scripture citations will be from the English Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

³ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, (San Francisco Jossey-Bass 2003), 1.

five percent attendance.⁴ The most disturbing information in McNeal's work is the fact that five percent or 112 million Christians worldwide have left the institutional church to preserve their faith. These believers no longer consider the church relevant to their spiritual development.⁵

Erwin McManus warned that just speaking of the decline or death of the church does not fully frame the grave nature of the problem. "This may seem strange, but the real tragedy is not that churches are dying but that churches have lost their reason to live!"⁶ There is a life cycle to this decline and it begins at the very moment the church reaches its peak. Suddenly there is the realization that this institution has the most people and the most money it may ever have. Strategies are conceived to preserve these assets of humanity and wealth. The creativity and risk taking that ushered in the success is squelched in an effort to maintain what is an acknowledged sure thing. This is the point of diminishing return and momentum is forfeited.⁷ McManus also lamented that Seminaries are "equipping pastors to preserve the past instead of creating the future. We became known for becoming traditional rather than transformational. The ritual replaced the radical. The pastor/teacher replaced the apostle/evangelist. We've spent millions preserving our music and hymnals rather than creating worship that expresses the culture in which we live."⁸ These are harsh words for a troubled time.

⁴ Ibid. 2-3

⁵ Ibid. 4

⁶ Erwin R. McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind*, (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001), 24.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 25

Phyllis Tickle has long pointed out that Christianity has historically cycled in five hundred year intervals.⁹ Martin Luther boldly presented his *95 Thesis* on the Wittenberg door on October 31, 1517, ushering in massive changes in the way the timeless, unchanging Gospel is presented to the world. There was great opposition to early modern contextualization. The Guttenberg printing press was invented to print Bibles for the masses. The results of creating resources and narrative that engaged the German culture are epic in the testimony of the Gospel. Luther created the future by introducing the origins of the past in such a way that a relationship with Jesus Christ could be clearly understood in the present. Now five hundred years later the church must embrace postmodern Christianity in a post-Christian America. Tickle has a great reminder for those who are tragically attached to an out of context history project. “It is especially important to remember that no standing form of organized Christian faith has ever been destroyed by one of our semi-millennial eruptions. Instead, each simply has lost hegemony or pride of place to the new and not-yet-organized form that was birthing.”¹⁰

Contextual Worship Style

There is an unfortunate dichotomy that has been dragged through American Christian history like a ball and chain. Puritanical Christians applaud the missionary who learns to play a didgeridoo, thought to be the world’s oldest wind instrument, to reach out to indigenous Australians, but condemns the use of drums and electric guitar as tools to create, at the very least, a worship environment consistent with the 1970’s in their home church.

⁹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 27.

¹⁰ Ibid.

This reluctance, and in some congregations defiance, to embrace contextual worship style has resulted in a time warp at the front door of too many churches that, in large part, accounts for the alarming decline in American Christianity.

Certainly there is risk in contextualization. There must be Spirit-led, heartfelt conviction that a cultural connection is being forged. Dean Gilliland explained this risk using the word picture of a razor's edge. "Contextualization is a delicate enterprise if ever there was one . . . the evangelist and mission strategist stand on a razor's edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences . . . Fall to the right and you end in obscurantism, so attached to your conventional ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into to syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct another gospel which is not the gospel."¹¹

Contextualization has been oversimplified and watered down to an argument over musical style. Ed Stetzer researched the elements of successful "Comeback Churches." He has helped champion a term, or biblical factor that better addresses contextual worship. Stetzer challenges churches to be missional. "The wrong question is whether your church is traditional or contemporary and which is better. The real issue is whether your church is biblically faithful, acting as the presence of Christ in the community at large, able to relate Christ to people in culture, and is on mission. In short, is your church missional?"¹²

¹¹ Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 30-31.

¹² Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 4.

This paradigm involves all the elements of worship from the way we live, the way seekers are invited to join in worship, to the songs selected, and the word pictures used to bridge historical and real-time application.

This missional approach is founded on content and enhanced by structure. Robert Webber provided a very practical explanation. “To state it very simply, you gather the people, you tell them the story, you break bread, and you go home to love and serve the Lord.”¹³ Within each of these essentials you must assess not just a culturally sensitive outcome, but the most culturally engaging outcome. Telling the story is where most energy and time is allocated, whether that is appropriate or not. Part of telling the story is worshipping through lyrics and music. Musical style is the ingredient in contextualization that causes the most contention. Unfortunately as was stated earlier the music debate tends to be about contemporary over traditional. Contextual musical style can be evaluated and selected in a number of ways, all of which involve communicating with the community God has provided for His glory and within the culture that exists. The first missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands set out to change cultural context by adorning the Samoan people in western dress, and teaching them European hymns. These evangelistic attempts met dismal failure. By contrast the Polynesian Cultural Center in Oahu is owned by the Mormon Church and now twenty five percent of Samoans are believed to be followers of the Latter Day Saints.¹⁴ One way to discover an engaging musical style is to ask the core group about their favorite radio stations. Another is to actually check out the music scene in the community. The music played in the street has sustainable style and musicians that may be available believers for worship. Remember the razor’s edge.

¹³ Robert E. Webber, “Don’t Get Hung Up On Style,” *Reformed Worship* 39 (1996): 4.

¹⁴ Adherents.com, “Largest Latter-day Saint Communities - Mormon/Church of Jesus Christ Statistics,” http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_lds.html (accessed October 7, 2009).

Paul distinguished witnessing and preaching to the Church at Rome with these words. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Rom 10:17) Every word we speak to an eager ear should be understood in a context that draws the hearer to Christ. The vernacular we speak, the word pictures we use, and authenticity that comes across in the way we communicate is all crucial in achieving a contextual worship style.

Elements as insignificant as the dress code expectations of a church are important to contextualization. A hard working grandmother once told this author that she and her four grandchildren could not go to the church that more closely fit her cultural context because she couldn't afford to buy fancy dresses for church. She added that they had talked behind her back about wearing the same dress every Sunday. All four of her grandchildren now know the Lord; they met Jesus in jeans and a t-shirt.

Conclusion

Since contextualization requires community contact and interaction, and the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), requires community contact and interaction how can we separate lack of relevant interaction from declines in American Christianity. Robert Lewis asked the right question, “If your church closed its doors today, would anyone but its own members notice? Would the city be saddened because such a great community-transformation partner, a missionary of impact, was gone?”¹⁵

It was not that long ago that pastors gathered to speak of spiritual renewal and marvel at the latest commentary works. Now those same pastors are clamoring for the next church growth strategy.

¹⁵ Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, 5.

They will wear Hawaiian shirts on the fifth Sunday and read about mega-church pastors in far way lands, and sadly decide to preserve their comfort zone until the baby-boomers money is all gone.

Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the Lord will work for us, for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few.” (1Sam 14:6) There are many eager, missional followers of Christ who have been called out from the sleeping army just like Jonathan. The emergent church with its growing pains and renegade attitude is divinely focused on context. This movement is having a significant impact on those postmoderns who have decided the American church is not a relevant force in their lives.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)
Now that is contextual!

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