

the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

In This Issue

Ancient practices for youth leaders, living against the grain of consumerist patterns, secularizing features in our unexamined worship—here are probings showing how deep must be our re-visioning of Christian life for this present time. Mark Yaconelli (p.1) proposes (predicts? promises?) a recovery of spiritualities long forgotten for the forms of youth ministry which he believes will in fact give fresh form to the 21st century church. Rich Pleva and John Flett (p. 2) push farther out on the matters raised by Tom Boogaart (September 1999), digging at the roots of the consumerism that grips us so strongly. Mark McKim (p.3) takes a hard, self-critical look at the effect of informal worship traditions that increase the secularized quality of our world rather than live its alternative.

In this issue we also listen in on a meditation shared by Jim Brownson at a meeting of one of the GOCN's research teams (p.4). He shows in John 17 how emphatic it is to the gospel writer that the point of all this is that "God sent Jesus." Finally, an introduction to an e-conversation on Christianity and Media Culture (p.6) is accompanied by Peter Horsfield's careful and vivid model for the relation of faith and culture which provides the framework for the discussion group.

—the Editor

THE RETURN TO ANCIENT SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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Heartbroken by our culture's disregard for teens, hounded by the clatter of mail-gadgets, confused by the seductive sirens of the market place,

As the majority of youth ministers become specialized with graduate degrees and certificates, a strong minority will hunger to become better disciples—casting off professional conferences for retreat centers that offer rest, spiritual practice, and attention to the everpresent Christ. Visits to monasteries, guidance through Ignatian exercises, and

The ancient disciplines of premodern Christianity—silence, prayer, and meditation—will be the necessary tools for forming souls in the twenty-first-century church.

discouraged by the worn-out bickering of church staffs and denominational leaders, frustrated with insular forms of worship—and above all, lonely in their longing to love God and love kids—youth workers in this new decade will become increasingly desperate to find ways to save their own souls.

Those who don't leave ministry will seek out sabbath forms of living—simple, ordinary practices that integrate silence, meditation, and listening (contemplative) prayer.

More youth workers will seek to imitate Jesus' rhythm of withdrawal and retreat into deserted and solitary places.

regular appointments with spiritual directors will be the survival strategies of long-term youth workers in all denominations.

As the culture spins into hyperactivity and churches (even as they're declining) desperately imitate the consumer culture, I believe that only those youth workers who are mystics—who possess a lived-out experience of the indwelling Christ—will have anything to offer students.

It's significant that as youth workers return to the source of faith, they will bring their students with

Continued on page 5

Responses to Boogaart on “Tithing”

CONSUMERISM AND CONSUMPTION

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The opening article in the September 1999 issue of the GOC newsletter prompts me to write. I refer to Thomas Boogaart’s essay on “Tithing and Addiction” (<http://www.gocn.org/news113.htm#Tithing>). Naturally, being a good “liberal” Christian, I agree. But I’m troubled. “Consumerism” seems to me too easy and convenient a target. Maybe my early training in the life sciences shows through at this point, but I have trouble believing that “consumption,” *ipso facto*, is evil. One way to distinguish between that which is living, and that which is not, is by consumption. Living things “consume” (in fact, aren’t we told that our God is a “consuming fire”?), the dead do not.

I’m alarmed by the excesses of consumption, as is the author of the article. But what I’d appreciate is a more thoughtful discussion of what, in the real world, constitutes “consumerism”—or more specifically, how we are to distinguish between “acceptable” consumption, and “addiction” to consumption or “excessive” consumption. I suspect that consumerism looks very different depending on the perspective and position of the beholder, that it is easy to condemn in the abstract, but exceedingly difficult to name in the concrete. I’m not so naive as to expect that easy answers and definitions are available (and I’d be suspicious if easy answers were suggested!), but I’d appreciate some grappling with this issue.

Do you know of resources that might help me with this question?

THE INADEQUACIES OF TITHING

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Paradigm is a favoured word in mission circles. It denotes a pattern or mode of thinking. Often a paradigm presents a genuine alternative to current modes. Yet the term is one greatly misused. Moves within a culture are sometimes labelled paradigmatic when actually they are only cultural opposites. A cultural opposite is a reaction, and requires the original move for its own existence. Cultural captivity creates this confusion. And it is easy to see how articulating a new paradigm, a new vision, while inhabiting the old one, is a difficult task.

Paradigm thinking is seminal for mission to Western culture. Indeed,

mission by its very nature is a paradigm move. It introduces cultural distance, distinctiveness; it is a move of originality. From this develops Gospel & Culture’s vitality. Cultural opposites, on the other hand, do not constitute mission. These are moves defined and sustained by the original culture. The difference is significant – a paradigm transcends the old structures, a cultural opposite propagates them.

Thomas Boogaart in his article, “Tithing and Addiction” (*Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter*, 11(3), September 1999:1-2) presented a pithy diagnosis of consumerism. His suggested solution to this addiction was tithing. Now I do not want to detract from the concept of tithing, which is a proper worship-driven response to God. But tithing alone is not a missionary move; it does not offer a new view of reality. Tithing, as outlined by Boogaart, is a reaction to, not a destruction of, the phenomena of

Continued on page 5

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EVANGELICAL WORSHIP FOSTERS SECULARISM

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The way many evangelicals worship contributes to a secular world view or at least fails to challenge it. By worship I mean: gathering of people, singing hymns, praying, reading Scripture and hearing a sermon. By secularism I mean a world view wherein God is relegated to the edges of life. So defined, evangelical worship fosters secularism in at least five ways:

1. Me-focused: In *Silence of Angels*, Dale Allison writes that secularization separates us from the natural world and thus cuts us off from “sources of wonder [and] feelings of terror and in their place nurtures feelings of self-sufficiency.”

Much contemporary preaching accepts this notion of self-sufficiency and intimates that adopting the Christian faith will solve problems, improve family life and make one feel good. Though that may sometimes be true, the focus has shifted to “me and my problems” – a hallmark of secularism – rather than God and his sovereign call on my life.

Jesus said that being his follower would make life harder, not easier. Anything that downplays the demand of Christ to costly discipleship secularizes Christianity and cheapens grace.

2. Impersonal: Increasing urbanization, which places many individuals in a relatively small area, makes it harder to believe in a God who loves and cares for each of us individually. We feel lost in a crowd. Evangelical worship too often feels the same. It is possible to walk into many congregations week after week and leave unnoticed and alone.

Urbanization also has separated where we work from where we live. This, contends Lesslie Newbigin, creates pressure to divide life into two spheres – the private sphere or home life in which faith operates, and the public sphere or work realm in which some other belief system dominates.

A good deal of evangelical preaching, however, is little more than an extended altar call (even though most in the congregation are already believers). Preaching about Christ’s lordship is important, but it may be equally necessary to provide settings where adults can learn to integrate their faith into their vocation and interests, whether business, investment, politics or others.

3. Entertaining: Increasingly, our worship times resemble concerts, with the choir or soloist on a “stage” in front of the

“audience,” in an “auditorium” that resembles a concert hall more than a sanctuary. In many churches a particularly good musical effort is rewarded by applause much as it would be at a concert. The audience thinks about the performer, not God.

Christian worship should not be entertainment but engagement by all present. If there is an “audience” it is an audience of one – God – and all in the sanctuary are part of the performance, joining themselves to the one great cosmic chorus of praise and thanksgiving.

4. Informal: Evangelical worship seems to be increasingly informal not only in attire but in attitude. Choirs arrive in piecemeal fashion, as does the clergy. There is no clear indication that the worship service has commenced until the speaker manages to raise his voice above the milling congregation. The intent is to make worship inviting, to remove any perceived stuffiness and to make God approachable. But God’s comforting presence has been so emphasized that his transcendent nature and awesome majesty are almost forgotten.

5. Noisy: Our churches also do nothing to counteract the constant background noise we hear in our urbanized, industrial, media-drenched society. Yet many worship services lack silent times when no one is speaking, singing or reading.

One of the strongest threads running through Christian tradition is that God is found not in noise but in silence and contemplation. Surely the church’s response should be to provide opportunities for quietude.

We live in an increasingly secularized society. Our worship must consciously take that into account, lest instead of challenging the secular world view, our worship facilitates or contributes to it. ■

[Excerpted from a paper presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association and first published in the January/February 1998 issue of Faith Today magazine. Used with permission.]



THE GOD WHO SENT JESUS

REFLECTIONS FROM JOHN 17

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One of the more common misunderstandings about the gospel of John is that it is only concerned with persuading the reader to believe something about Jesus.

Now it is of course true that the fourth gospel has a great deal to say about Jesus. Indeed, the purpose of the book stated clearly in 20:31 indicates that “these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you might have life in his name.” This statement, coupled with the many “I am” sayings throughout the gospel, clearly points to a central

We believe that God loves the world because we believe that God sent Jesus.

concern with believing very basic affirmations regarding Jesus’ identity.

Yet I am not willing to abandon my first statement, that it is a mistake to assume that the gospel of John is only concerned with persuading the reader to believe in Jesus. My reason is this: in John, to believe that Jesus is the Messiah is also to believe something about God. Do you catch it, three times over toward the end of this chapter (17:21, 23, 25)? What is most central for the world to believe about God (not about Jesus) is that *God sent Jesus*.

This needs to be understood against the programmatic backdrop of 1:18: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” God is both the hidden one whom no one has seen, and the self-revealing one who longs to be known, and who therefore sends the only Son.

The sending of the Son expresses something basic about God: that God wants to be known. God’s mission is to know and be known. Eternal life consists in knowing God, and Jesus Christ *whom God sent* (17:3). It is in Christ preeminently that we discover this—that God wants to be known, and it is central to Christ’s mission that the world know this about God—that God is the one who sent Jesus.

But this passage tells us more than merely that God wants to be known, and therefore sends Jesus. It also speaks powerfully of the unity between the Father and the Son. Because God is preeminently the sending God who

wants to be known, the way in which Jesus is united with God is by virtue of his having been sent by God. Because Jesus fully embraces the self-revealing mission that this sending God gives to him, Jesus is fully united to the God whose self-revealing mission reflects his deepest being.

To be fully united to God’s mission is to be fully united to God. And it is this unity in mission to which the disciples are also invited. Over and over, Jesus speaks of mutual indwelling in love among the Father, the Son, and the disciples. And what does this mutual love and mutual indwelling reveal? *That God sent Jesus*.

How do we unpack that? Maybe this will help: Jesus’ union with God flows from his fulfilling the mission which God gives to him (17:4)—when Jesus is united to God’s mission, he is united to God; in the same way, the union of the disciples with Jesus and with God flows from their completing the work which he gives them to do. (17:18 “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” And 20:21 “As the Father sent me, so I send you.”) And that work which the disciples are to fulfill is centrally to be the new community—to love each other as Jesus loved them(13:34-35).

Simply by being the new community, the world comes to believe that God sent Jesus—that is, the world comes to believe that God has a mission to this world, and wants to sweep us up into it.

The most basic Christian affirmation is that God loves the world. But why do we believe such a thing, in the midst of tragedy, heartache, famine, war, disaster, and all the ills that flesh is heir to? We believe that God loves the world finally because we believe that God sent Jesus. If God is the kind of God who sent Jesus, then God must love the world. And how does the world become convinced that God is the kind of God who sent Jesus? Only when those disciples who are called into God’s mission reflect that mission by being the new community—by loving each other. It is only when the disciples of Jesus embrace his mission by loving each other that the world comes to know the *missio Dei*, and therefore that God loves the world. ■

IN MEMORIAM

It is with sadness that I announce to the GOCN readership the death of the Rev. Don Troost. Don was a part of our network for many years and brought a spirit of wisdom and grace to our conversations. His 21 years of service as synod executive of the Synod of Albany in the Reformed Church in America nurtured a “missional church” vision for the life of its congregations and for their life together as a Synod. Don served on the GOCN’s research team on “Missional Implications for Denominational Systems” until the time of his sudden death. Don was 55 years old.

— George Hunsberger

The Return to Ancient Spiritual Practices

continued from page 1

them. Practices and experiences that focus on the presence of God will undergird confirmation classes and curriculum lessons. Youth workers will operate more holistically—concerned with transformation more than information. And the ancient disciplines of premodern Christianity—silence, prayer, and meditation—will be the necessary tools for forming souls in the twenty-first-century church.

Youth programs will slowly shift, too. Little spaces of silence and solitude will be scattered throughout classes and youth events. Singing will deepen from sentimental imitations of pop music to melodic chants that enhance prayer and worship. Expensive, resort like camps will be replaced by pilgrimages and periods of fasting in the wilderness as more churches seek to offer rites of passage.

Lectio divina, the Ignatian Awareness Examen, and the Jesus prayer will be familiar tools in any established youth program. In the immediate future, churches will exploit these prayers as the latest exotic ministry gimmick, but a good

minority will incorporate biblical meditation and contemplative prayer as regular aspects of their discipleship programs.

Further, as youth workers and churches continue to engage in practices that attend to the presence of God, a significant portion will seek to disband their youth ministries. They'll create churches that function as retreat centers, where children, youths, and adults can nurture their lives in Christ together.

I don't believe ancient disciplines and contemplative practices of the church will ever be as widespread and popular as game nights, ski retreats, and those models of ministry that imitate the surrounding culture. But in the next 10 to 20 years, more youth workers will recognize that, in this period in the life of the church, it's silence that proclaims the good news, stillness that brings justice, fasting that feeds the hungry, and prayer that trains the heart to hear the quiet beckoning of the living Christ. ■

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Responses to Boogaart

continued from page 2

consumerism.

Take as an example Boogaart's own statement, 'Tithing confronts our material addiction. Giving 10 percent of our income would demand a fundamental change in our level of consumption – fewer meals in restaurants, fewer vacations, fewer shoes, fewer of the items we have come to see as necessary for the good life.' Such a statement can only be made where consumerism is the operative paradigm. We are talking here of money, and not only of money but disposable money, financial surplus. And to this tithing presents a pragmatic solution; consumerism is conquered because we cannot afford it. For anyone who has dealt with poverty this is nonsense. Even the poorer sectors of society succumb to consumerism's advances, borrowing money at high interest to buy televisions, stereos, or labelled clothes. Minimizing one's potential to possess is no solution. Consumerism continues unabated.

Tithing's inability to confront consumerism can be further demonstrated by reference to Robert Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral. In 1997 Schuller embarked on a 40 million dollar project to build an International Visitors' Center in his already extensive complex. The funds for this came from tithing. In this case individual tithing, far from restricting

consumerism, contributed to a corporate consumerism. If Boogaart is correct and consumerism has won the heart of the West, what guarantees are there our tithed dollars will be spent any better than this?

Consumerism is a way of perceiving reality, which the physical act of giving money does not affect; I can tithe faithfully and remain consumerist at heart. And no doubt the majority of Western Christians do this every Sunday. Tithing does not require a change in thinking and is without tools for reinterpreting culture. Our mission to Western culture requires a more dynamic, vital concept, and that is stewardship. Stewardship, or dominion, of the earth is part of God's original intention for humanity. Stewardship provides tithing its proper context—the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it. It offers a new paradigm for understanding our role in the world, addressing not only consumerism but also questions of economic growth, social justice, labour relations, ecology, free trade, recycling, and even eschatology.

Consumerism and stewardship are incompatible. The former ravages the world's resources, while the latter purposes to serve God's creation. One cannot have a fully developed understanding of stewardship's responsibilities and participate unaffected in a consumerist culture. And in a nation such as the USA which has 6 percent of the world's population but which uses 25 percent of the world's resources, this is truly counter-cultural. ■

Christianity and Media Culture

The Christianity and Media Culture Listserve, also called XMC, is a Spanish/English language e-mail discussion group about the impact of electronic media and media-culture on Christian faith and practice, and the contextualization of Christian faith in the new media culture and the implications for Christian faith and practice. The list is supported by the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture and moderated by Dr. Peter Horsfield of the Electronic Culture Research Project within the Commission for Mission, Uniting Church in Victoria, Australia.

Interested persons may join the discussion group by sending an email message to <majordomo@uca.org.au> with the Subject field left blank and “subscribe xt-mediaculture” in the body of the email. Listserv members are welcome to raise issues, propose, discuss and debate questions, contribute resources, and share news of big or small experiments in adapting electronic media to faith activities by sending messages to <xt-mediaculture@uca.org.au> .

The purpose of the listserve is to explore the questions and issues identified in a “framework for discussion” document written by Horsfield and available online at the International Commission’s website at <http://www.jmcommunications.com/commission.html>. The text of that document is reprinted here with the author’s permission because of its suggestiveness regarding the encounter of gospel and culture at the heart of the GOCN’s work.

A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION OF FAITH AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA-CULTURE

Peter Horsfield

1. *Communication is fundamental and theologically foundational to our practical and social being.* Our being as human is created in communication and is constituted by communication. Theologically, we exist first and foremost because God communicates in the act of creating.

2. *The different means by which we communicate bring their own colour and flavour to a communication situation and are part of the meaning of what takes place.* Communication is most commonly (always?) mediated through different senses, which are part of God’s making and share in constructing the meaning of what is communicated. Likewise, different technologies of communication address different senses and as such construct meaning in different ways.

3. *Faith and culture are inextricably intertwined.* There is no pure, unenculturated Christian faith, nor is there culture which is void of the grace of God. The faith ideas and practices we hold share commonality with other expressions, but are always particular to our cultural context.

4. *Christian theology for much of its life has largely ignored the cultural influence of media in its analysis and reflections.* Though most Christian theologians at some point address the place of culture in their theological construction and analysis, very few specifically identify the part played by media in constructing culture. To a large extent this reflects the tendency of academic thinkers to view media “instrumen-

tally” rather than “culturally.”

5. *The technologies a society uses in its communication exert a powerful influence on the shape, values, meaning and order of the culture. In understanding a culture, one needs to give attention to the different forms of communication within the culture and how they relate to each other.*

Communication patterns as they are formed by forms of media are not the only determinative factor in a culture. But they are crucial because they form the web of the culture, the complex networks of connections and relationships that enable every other cultural activity to take place.

Some of the reasons why differences in media contribute to the construction of different cultural meaning are: different media make different use of individual and social memory; they prefer different kinds of information over others; they require different skills and resources; they create different patterns of social status and power; they address different senses and develop different patterns and relationships of perception; they structure the representation of reality in different ways; they establish different patterns of social relationship in the communication process, which develop different forms of social organization; they have a different relationship and use of space and time, creating different cultural perceptions and values of place, history and movement.

6. *When one media-form dominates in a culture, that culture will reflect major characteristics of that media-form.* Walter Ong amongst others has identified major differences in cultural patterns between pre-literate, oral cultures and cultures that have systems of writing. His analysis identifies a correlation between characteristics of the dominant media and cultural characteristics such as patterns of thought, social organization and practices, structures and participation in community, and religious outlooks and practices. (See

particularly his *Orality and Literacy*.)

7. *When there are changes in the dominant media within a culture, there will be significant changes in cultural perceptions, organization, meaning and value as a result.* New ways of communicating change the nature of the communication web and there is a ripple or shake-out effect amongst other ways of connecting and relating within the culture. In some cases new ways of communicating simply replace the old. In other cases, the new overlays the old or integrates with it to create a new media-mix, with the old continuing but in a new way.

8. *In practice most cultures now integrate different media systems in different ways, creating what Nestor Garcia Canclini has called "hybrid cultures."* Most modern cultures also are composed of a myriad of different media-cultural sub-groups within the one culture. But Ong's proposition still retains interpretive force. The dominant media within the particular sub-group play a major role in giving that sub-group its distinctive patterns and values. Likewise the media of the political and economic elite, or media which by virtue of their power constitute a new political and economic elite, tend to legitimize and reward particular forms of cultural value and order over others.

9. *We are currently in the midst of a major cultural paradigm shift in world societies because of changes in the dominant media of communication.* We are moving from patterns of cultural value and organization that were defined by the ethos and social organization of the literate elite in western countries, to cultures that are being redefined by new patterns enabled by electronic media. The order and ethos of the new is still emerging.

10. *Since its early beginnings, Christian faith has been closely identified with its organization in institutional churches that have closely aligned themselves with ascendant cultures, first of writing,*

then of print. Christian faith in the west early on adapted and defined itself significantly within the philosophy and politics of Greco-Roman Hellenism, a strongly literate culture. Martin Luther made extensive use of the printing press in his Reformation in the 16th century. In these adaptations, Christian faith has played a significant role in shaping the development of those cultures, and has named good theological reasons in doing so. But Christian faith has also been significantly shaped by the characteristics of those particular media-cultures in the development of its thought, its practices, and its organizational and political organization and alignments.

11. *Today, a new form of media system has emerged, one based not on transmission and storage of information as words and numbers on a page, but one based on electrical transmission of information through sound waves or electrical impulses, its storage as magnetic digital data, and its potential for reproduction in any number of multi-sensory forms either sequentially or consecutively.* This new medium presents a radically different way of appropriating information with subsequent implications for patterns of thinking and meaning construction, different potentials and necessities of relationship formation, different forms of social and political order, and the reconstruction of different concepts and centres of status and power.

12. *This new media-culture that is in process of being formed presents significant challenges to the traditional conceptualizations and organization of Christian faith idea, practices and organization.* Traditional Christian practice in this century has been strongly formed within the framework of the culture of the Western Enlightenment. This culture has been significantly influenced by the ethos of the literate elite, with a strong emphasis on order and clarity in its structures of thought and social organization. (Stephen Toulmin in his

book *Cosmopolis* provides a very useful historical analysis of the social reasons for this emphasis). For Christians with roots in this culture and whose social and political power is tied closely to these cultural characteristics, the changes brought by electronics are seen as destructive and a threat to the interests and integrity of Christian faith.

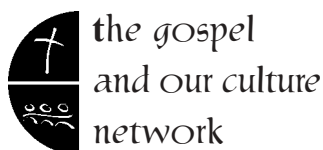
But God's creative Spirit is at work in the course of human civilization, continually bringing new into being. I see no reason why the new that is emerging now is not a result of God's ongoing creative activity in the same way as earlier periods, carrying with it all the same ambiguities of creation and fall that characterize all of our human endeavors. In some ways the new media-culture has potential for serious human destructiveness; in other ways it has the potential to root out some of the destructive patterns that have been entrenched for centuries.

The question is how is Christian faith to be contextualized into this new cultural context? What creative changes is God bringing to our heritage of thought, practices and organization through the new; and in what ways does our heritage shape the creative way in which we live as members of this culture through adaptation, resistance, encouragement, critique, enjoyment, companionship and service in order to participate in God's ongoing creation. ■



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MISSIONAL SYSTEMS
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Since the publication of *Missional Church*, a vigorous conversation has developed across North America about the implications of a missional ecclesiology and our engagement with a rapidly changing culture.

Denominational leaders, seminary educators and pastors increasingly ask how we might look at our current systems of church life and reconceive them in a missional way.

At this Consultation, academicians and practitioners from congregations, denominational structures and theological seminaries will come together to find new ways of engaging these missional questions together.

The consultation will be given shape by the work of research team members Al Roxburgh, Pat Keifert, Duncan McIntosh, Mike Regele, and Craig Van Gelder who have been exploring the issues of the consultation in the framework of three particular church systems in three North American locations.

Registration brochures will be mailed in early August.
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