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CULTURE & WORSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

The Collins English Dictionary defines the two words in my title as follows:

Culture
'1. The total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action. 2. the total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group.'
[C15: from Old French, from Latin *cultura* a cultivating, from *colere* to till.]

Worship
'1. To show profound religious devotion and respect to; adore or venerate (God or any person or thing considered divine). 2 (tr.) To be devoted to and full of admiration for. 3. (intr.) To have or express feelings of profound adoration.'
[Old English weorthscipe, from WORTH + -SHIP.]

The words capture both the size and scale of this subject. Put side by side like this, they also point to the tensions resulting. Culture: *the total... shared* dimensions of assumed norms of behaviour in a particular society or group. Worship: *profound... devoted to... full of admiration for* – in other words, the whole of your life, lived in relation to God. You can see how they tread the same ground; if the derivation *cultura* is right, they till the same soil.

We are familiar with theological explorations of the relationship between culture and worship. The most famous is Richard Niebuhr's, who distinguished five different yet overlapping attitudes: from Christ against culture[1] to Christ the transformer of culture. His has for some time been

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[1]   Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1951). In between, Niebuhr

the starting-point for theological exploration. The Lausanne Covenant of 1974 put it more simply:

> because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.[2]

The Willowbank Report of 1978 brought it rather closer to home for our churches:

> No theological statement is culture-free. Therefore all theological formulations must be judged by the teaching of the Bible itself which stands above them all. Their value must be judged by their faithfulness to it as well as by the relevance with which they apply its message to their own culture.[3]

By the same token we have immediately to concede that experiences of worship are also not culture-free; their value must be judged by faithfulness and relevance in the same way. This is at the heart of our exploration. How does the everlasting Word engage with ever-changing human cultures? How do those who are persuaded to follow the everlasting Word express their following when they meet together? Where may we find help in the tensions that result? First, we will reflect with 1 Corinthians on the priorities that should shape such a conversation. Along the way, we will note the work of four current writers: Graham Cray, John Drane, Marva Dawn and Don Carson. We will identify four areas of concern, and conclude with three examples of a local church seeking to engage its surrounding cultures in worshipful ways.

I CORINTHIANS

Someone has said when there's a controversy in church, 'raise a bigger one'. 1 Corinthians is full of controversy as Paul battles to lift the horizons of these Christians and their leaders beyond their local squabbles

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considers the Christ of culture, Christ and culture in synthesis, and Christ and culture in paradox.

[2] *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester, 1988), p. 183 – article on Culture by K. Bediako. See the comment on putting this more inclusively in my section on 'Language', note 26.

[3] *Ibid.*

to the bigger issues. When we survey our own current, complex church scene, we hear the same message. Facing the twin trends of massive and continuing decline in membership and attendance[4] and real growth in some churches, the focus of attention continues to be how local church life – and specially, regular church services – can enable us to relate to our culture and provide a platform for engagement.

Paul's introduction to 1 Corinthians provides a valuable framework for worship. In 1:1-3, he writes to a Christian community, *the church of God*, in a particular place and culture, *Corinth*. Immediately, we recognise his expressive, excessive world as similar to our own: a culture of freedom and self-promotion, marked by competitive consumerism. It is postmodernity before its time.[5] These Corinthian Christian communities are primarily identified on one hand by what the Lord has done for them (*sanctified in Christ Jesus*), and on the other by their calling (*called to be holy* – a word capturing both their relationship with God and their manner of living). As a counter to their self-contained, autonomous view that the local is all, Paul will constantly remind them of their connectedness to the wider Christian scene (*together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*). As to Christian leadership, he will constantly have to contrast his own style with that of their local leaders, and will constantly remind them of his partnership with them as he alerts them to the very serious issues they face (*Paul... Sosthenes... the church of God in Corinth... our Lord Jesus Christ*).

As he surveys a shockingly compromised, divided church, and responds to the questions and criticisms they have sent him, he makes a deceptively simple declaration of what really matters: *Jesus Christ, and him crucified* (2:2). A whole world of complications follow, as anyone who has tried to preach 1 Corinthians systematically knows. We encounter Jewish longing for miracles and Greek desires for ever more impressive wisdom; we move from the tensions of marriage and singleness to the management of legal disputes, conduct at meetings; and we hear of bizarre practices like baptism for the dead. In the words of one of our tabloids, 'All human life is here' – and the gospel engages with it.

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[4] A vital distinction in Scotland if we are to be honest about our figures for church involvement.

[5] Anthony Thistelton, *How to read 1 Corinthians*, writing in *From Athens to Jerusalem* (the journal of RTSF) 3:3 (Spring 2002). Thistleton goes on to say: 'The mind-set at Corinth is closer to our own day than it is to many of the intervening centuries.... Paul never doubted the creative power of the God of the cross and resurrection to transform it.'

Along the way, we are grateful for Paul's challenges to this church, for they prove to be exactly his challenges to our churches. Fragmenting, argumentative Christian groups are challenged to be churches united around gospel foundations; chaotic and competitive meetings are challenged to reflect the God of both order and Spirit-given variety; self-centred and self-serving approaches to worship and life are challenged to place their trust in the weakness of the cross and the ordinariness of the church. Throughout, we are assured that God is at work through Jesus Christ and by his Spirit, and that God's purposes for both church and world will be achieved.

CONTEMPORARY WRITERS

Graham Cray[6] describes our current culture under four headings, with clear pointers for our response. It's worth noting that the western culture is described is an increasingly global phenomenon, reflecting trends in sports, clothing, commerce and media.

First, it is a culture marked by the prime value of personal choice. It is a consumer culture: 'I shop, therefore I am.' It is both addictive and anaesthetising, resulting in a shift in focus from the future to the present. We may wish to respond by giving choices of styles and shape of services and music, about which more later; we will certainly want to present a focus on the past and the future in order to make sense of the present.

Second, the culture reflects a search for identity: 'Just as consumerism promises happiness but creates a culture of disappointment, so contemporary culture promises freedom, but creates instability.'[7] What is the story we'll tell ourselves about ourselves? Where have we come from, where are we going, and who are we? We have the Bible's big story to tell in answer, if – and it's becoming a bigger 'if' – we can find ways of getting a hearing in order to tell it.

Third, the culture prides itself on flexibility: if the only fixed point is what others think of us and how they see us, we must keep moving. It is therefore marked by temporary allegiances and communities. We have a range of communities to offer, taking a much longer, more committed and permanent view; and we want to point people to the Lord, who is himself *the same yesterday, today and for ever* (Heb. 13:8).

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[6] Graham Cray, *Postmodern Culture and Youth Discipleship* Grove Pastoral booklet 76 (Cambridge, 1998). A fuller treatment of world cultures is David Burnett's *Clash of Worlds* (Eastbourne, 1990).

[7] *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

Finally, it is a culture of uncertainty under a bombardment of information. 'Human life and development is portrayed as trying to control a runaway lorry. Risk and uncertainty are the realities of everyday experience.'[8] Elsewhere, Cray speaks of life once being like a train journey: once you got on, you knew the destination. Now, it's more like a car journey, where every junction presents a decision.[9] We offer the possibility of certainty about God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We also offer the reality of continuing pastoral care, for 'In the new cultural landscape pastoral care is perhaps the most important means of mission.'[10] Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 9, we seek to come alongside, with all the resulting complications.

Three of John Drane's recent books are highly stimulating as they look at the interface between culture and worship. *Faith in a Changing Culture* was followed by *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith* and *The McDonaldization of the Church*.[11] He builds on Paul's approach in 1 Corinthians 9;[12] and the unusual and often unnoticed word *katangello* in 1 Corinthians 11:26, which describes how believers proclaim the Lord's death through the Eucharist.[13] Drane is always challenging the separation between worship and evangelism, appealing instead for integration, so that both sides of the coin are visible at once. Worship is encounter; worship is evangelism. In some ways, Drane restates the pioneering ministry of the Anglican evangelist David Watson, whose Christian Celebrations aimed to be 'shop-windows' of living, attractive Christian faith, and were the precursor of some of our community and cell-church models.

Most strikingly Drane rails against standardising worship: *McDonaldization* is his application of the sociologist George Ritzer's thesis that rational systems have come to dominate. 'Put in a nutshell, the Enlightenment-inspired process of rationalization, which identified the highest human good with efficiency, predictability, quantification and control... has led to a devaluing of the human spirit and a heightening of...

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[8]   *Op. cit.*, p. 16, reflecting on Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990).

[9]   Address to the Evangelical Alliance National Assembly, Cardiff, November 2001.

[10] *Op. cit.*, p. 19, quoting Paul Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate* (DLT 1998), p. 11.

[11] John Drane, *Faith in a Changing Culture* (London, 1994); *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith* (Carlisle, 2000); *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London, 2000).

[12] *Faith*, p. 109.

[13] *Faith*, p. 114.

personal alienation.'[14] The scandal is that our churches have done exactly the same. In a world of choice and change, our churches – and, I might add, not only Episcopalian ones who pride themselves on having set liturgies – have stubbornly continued to offer only standard fare. And generations of spiritual seekers[15] have gone elsewhere.

On the basis that 'Worship is all that I am, responding to all that God is'[16] Drane's appeal is for variety tailored to cultures. That may be Club Church in Edinburgh[17] or Church for the Homeless in Cambridge, churches in pubs or theatres; even Chaplaincies to Nursing Homes and local Shopping Centres might fulfil his descriptions. In West and South East Edinburgh, local churches are talking and praying together as we seek to respond to retail, business, and residential housing developments around us. We accept that not every existing church will be able to respond; we recognise in honesty that many will not wish to; yet we're looking for permission to plant a springboard of support through both prayer and finance. We're also realising that talking about churches or even congregations may not in the first instance be helpful: the terms carry too much freight, too great a weight of history. Better to speak of groups who will aim to minister and witness in appropriate ways, thus allowing maximum freedom and imposing minimum limitations.

Marva Dawn writes acutely and with passion, pointing us in a different direction. *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* and *A Royal 'Waste' of Time*[18] are sharp critiques of churches which been trying to engage culture to the point where she feels they have been giving the gospel game away. Her appeal is for Churches to be both alternative and parallel to their world:

> We gather together in worship to speak our language, to read our narratives of God at work, to sing the hymns of the faith in a variety of styles, to chant and pour out our prayers until we know the truth so well that we can go out to the world around us and invite that world to share this truth with us. In our worship, we are formed by biblical narratives that tell a different

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[14] *McDonaldization*, though the page eludes me...

[15] Movingly described in *McDonaldization*, chapter 4.

[16] *Faith*, p. 120.

[17] Peter Neilson, *A Theology of Entertainment and Leisure* (SETS conference, 2001) describes this initiative.

[18] Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: a theology of worship for the turn-of-the-century culture* (Grand Rapids, 1995); *A Royal 'Waste' of Time – the splendour of worshiping God and being church for the world* (Grand Rapids, 1999).

story from that of the surrounding culture. Since we thereby come to know the truth that sets us free, we are eager to share that truth with our neighbours; thus our worship must equip us for that mission with a deep sense of the extravagant splendour of God. Rather than being 'a vendor of religious goods and services' that cater to people's tastes, the Church is called to be 'a body of people sent on a mission.'[19]

Those seeking to be such counter-cultural communities and get ready for such an engagement may find 'worship wars' breaking out. The shock waves after she describes these in her first book led her to write: 'It seems that conflicts over worship are presently a universal ecclesial plague.'[20] She believes we are called to learn afresh what true worship means. Her desire is to see worship centred on God, with God both object and subject, for only thus will it be subversive of contemporary cultures.

It is robust writing, so much so that Drane describes Dawn as 'an incredibly angry person'.[21] Her chapter headings show how strongly she emphasises worship as a shock to our comfortable systems, a counter-cultural experience: 'Worship ought to kill us', 'Worship is not a matter of taste', and 'Do they really want such banality?'

Undoubtedly planning, preparing and presenting Christian meetings is very hard work – what Dawn calls 'the harder way'.[22] It is the way ahead, for it is the way of the gospel, the way of the cross. Don Carson recognises the same hard work. He begins by reflecting on the variety of cultural responses he encounters at international seminars, and concludes:

It's all great fun when it only lasts for a few days. But months and months of a new culture can be very wearing. And in a sense, that is what is going on even within America, or any other Westernized industrialized country. The pace of change is so fast that different generations are clashing with each other almost like competing cultures. For example, the radically different tastes in music that divide many congregations at the moment are, in part, culture clashes. And it is not easy to be wise. Some wag has said that the last seven words of the church will be, 'We've always done it this way before.' On the other hand, I have some sympathy for the position of C S Lewis, who maintained that he could put up with almost any pattern of corporate worship, so long as it did not change too often. His point is that mere novelty is in fact distracting. The deepest and best corporate worship

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[19] *Royal*, pp. 334-5
[20] *Royal*, p. 4.
[21] *McDonaldization*, p. 166.
[22] *Royal*, chapter 25 – initially applied to questions of musical presentation.

takes place when the forms are so familiar you never see them and can penetrate the reality. But try explaining *that* at your next church meeting.

Ultimately, there can never be peace and progress · on these and many related matters unless all sides carefully listen to the others and humbly resolve, while making a case, never to stand on their own rights. That is the way of the cross. It is the very lifeblood of those involved in cross-cultural outreach.[23]

I would only add the observation that the generations are multiplying: it's not just time spent in another culture, but the sheer variety of other cultures we're encountering which can be both exhilarating and exhausting. In my own limited experience, most issues surrounding the shape and flavour of church worship are pure culture. The resulting debates and divisions are symptoms of very particular and deeply held views of what is appropriate to do in a church context, and what are appropriate ways of expressing worship. In a culture of choice, the ultimate weapon is for people who disagree simply to leave. We who teach Scripture believing we are equipping God's people to grapple with these issues must regularly teach one another how to disagree in godly ways and, like Paul, to move to the bigger controversies.

All our writers accept the challenge of a biblical framework, working from principles of incarnation, atonement and transformation. All sketch our postmodern, Western culture as increasingly interactive, expressive, tactile, image-based, and choice rich. All long that we worship and honour God in the very broadest senses, allowing every dimension of our lives to be touched and changed by the gospel. All therefore challenge us at four levels:

WORD AND IMAGE

It is a commonplace to speak of the shift from a word-based world to one dominated by image and impression. Drane urges us to go with this, constantly appealing to us to recognise the richness of scriptural images. Dawn apparently rejects the culture of images in preference to word alone. Yet they would both agree that the key is to allow Scripture to speak on its own terms. Jesus' own teaching is full of illustrations and stories; Paul's own writing is rich with pictures and images. One post-Easter series we enjoyed was called 'Images of the Cross' – reflecting on the battlefield,

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[23]   The Cross and Christian Ministry – an exposition of passages from 1 Corinthians (Leicester, 1993), pp. 129-30.

courtroom, hospital, relationship and prison.[24] Previously, we had explored pictures of the church: organs in a body, the vine and the branches, partners in a marriage, stones in a building, sheep in a flock, a healing community, soldiers in an army.

Cray and Drane urge us to harness rapid changes in communications, and some are slowly learning to make use of video projection, Powerpoint and the like. We are not yet using them much beyond reinforcing the spoken word, and we're aware there's another altogether different stage to come. If we learn to use images in biblical ways we will want to be careful in our use of visual graphics, recognising that Scripture takes its images from human experience and allows its images to nestle in the imaginations, memories and minds of its hearers.[25]

LANGUAGE

We are accustomed to deep feelings aroused by efforts to make Christian language more inclusive. Paul's philosophy in 1 Corinthians 9 is clear, as is its application in this area: we must still work at this, if only to remove some of the more obvious stumbling-blocks to enquirers so as not to distract them from focussing on Jesus Christ.[26]

We know there are many traps on the way. Don Carson poignantly examines the furore over the publication of an inclusive language NIV in America.[27] As he reviews the challenges of Bible translation and observes the reality of Bible rage, he confesses 'this is not the sort of book I like to write'. In the debate as it surfaces in the Episcopal churches I inhabit, there is a continuing confusion between language about God and language

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[24] 'Images of the Cross': 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, Romans 3:21-31, Isaiah 53:1-12, 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2 and Mark 10:35-45 respectively.

[25] The handling of the cross is instructive as we contrast our interests with the Bible's. Whilst we need some help to understand its dynamics (death by suffocation, for example) and its universal shame, we may be drawn more to the mechanics and emotive aspects. It is noticeable that the Gospel writers seem not to go here.

[26] Reflecting on the Lausanne Statement of 1974 quoted earlier (note 2), nothing would be lost by making this inclusive, perhaps along these lines: 'because people are God's creatures, some culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because people are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.'

[27] Don Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate – a plea for realism* (Grand Rapids, 1998).

relating to people. There is need for a constant challenge to distinguish these two.

More significant is the need constantly to check our use of words, especially in the way we speak about worship. Marva Dawn has a chapter on this, considering words like 'contemporary, Lent, Advent, hymn, song, reform'; elsewhere she urges us to think of other ways of speaking about 'going to church'. Strangely she avoids the biggest word of all: worship. As we noted at the start, both worship and culture are all-consuming and all-pervasive terms. Neither must be allowed to become localised – so that we worship at 10.30 on a Sunday morning. Romans 12:1-2 challenges this misunderstanding of the term worship, but it constantly resurfaces. So much conversation and writing, even whilst acknowledging this, reverts to a localised use of the language. We notice attempts to put it right when worship leaders (as they're called) speak about moving in to a time of musical worship; but the sound system seems geared to suggest that music is the most important item in the service, and the music leader assumes when they play, 'we'll really worship.' It remains the default understanding of many congregations and ministers. It is a constant challenge in the language we use, and none of us is blameless: 'Let us worship God'; 'We meet for morning worship'; 'Now we move out from our worship to our world.' Perhaps we could sponsor a counter-trend, naming our meetings after their content as we praise, pray, hear God's Word or share communion.

A return to Paul's theology of meeting together would help us. According to 1 Corinthians 11-14, we meet to hear from God and to encourage one another. The meeting is clearly led by responsible leaders, and yet is participative, interactive, contributive, involved, expressive, governed by the Word. We are repeatedly told, in a variety of words, that the purpose of meeting is edification, upbuilding, and equipping. Above all, what we do is open to outsiders and impressive to them of the sense that God is here amongst these people.

PREMISES

Though we may dream of it, not all of us have the advantages of Renfrew St Stephens in Glasgow. One stormy St Stephen's night the huge spire fell in, destroying both roof and floor. Quoted in the video *Church Without Walls*, it in fact became a church without roof or floor, and gave the opportunity for complete remodelling.[28] Taking this church's life back to

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[28] A number of other comments have played with the application of this

first principles has allowed a new model to emerge – or we should say, to re-emerge, as it echoes the Reformation principles of a community centred on God's Word.[29] In the new St Stephens the congregation gather around a central pulpit, font and table, learning, welcoming and feeding together.

Like the poor, the challenge of remodelling church buildings is always with us. In a world where most hotels refurbish every four or five years, churches take rather longer. That may be because we are very slow to face the issues; or we discover that the buildings we have inherited are not as solid as we thought and major work is needed below the ground or in the main structures to produce a lasting improvement; or we have to work harder to persuade members because we rely largely on individual giving. Yet it is also because we take a longer view. On a recent tour of local churches, our church leaders were impressed by the quality of building being done and the desire that it should last for a very long time. As we work towards refurbishing, we want to take opportunities to remodel and do something beyond what a growing raft of public building regulations say we have to. Our aim is to provide God-honouring, good quality, long-lasting, flexible facilities, benefiting not this generation and the next, but many to come, building for perhaps a one-hundred year time frame.[30]

I suspect few of us would be bold enough to follow in the steps of one Los Angeles congregation. John Drane tells a delightful story of their harassed minister running out of time as he prepared a seeker-friendly service; he asked one of his congregation to 'make the building welcoming'. In so doing, literally by accident, the church made a vital discovery:

> What he had in mind was a little tidying up of the entrance, maybe a few extra lights, some floral displays, and so on. What he found when he arrived for the service was that the woman he had asked to do the job had taken him at his word, and the entire church had been remodelled so as to be more welcoming. She had assembled a collection of sofas and easy chairs

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theme: critics of *Church Without Walls* have even dubbed it a 'Ship without Sides'.

[29] As my non-Church hobby, I sing Barbershop. Much of our singing is done for church women's' groups (to my chagrin; I wanted to sing to get to meet people beyond church!). Acoustically, what this Episcopalian has come to call 'sideways' churches are the most striking examples of the congregation on three sides, gathered around the pulpit, table and font.

[30] Visits to Colinton Parish Church, Greenbank Parish Church, and St Andrew's Blackadder in North Berwick were hugely stimulating for our church leaders.

borrowed from her friends, and the main sanctuary had been entirely cleared of the traditional rows of seats, in place of which was a series of round tables, accommodating maybe a dozen people at each. Because the leaders arrived too close to the time of the event, there was no way they could restore 'normality' to the church building – which was just as well, for they soon realized that this was exactly what they needed if they were to be able to relate effectively to one another, let alone to the people they were seeking to reach from the outside.[31]

They left it like that.

LEADERS

The Los Angeles example is a challenge to those who lead churches. Whilst we constantly seek to build and maintain a biblical framework for thinking about premises, music, worship and so on, most of our church events have opened up only to the extent that we allow other people to do some of the things ministers do. Drane describes this as the 'theatre' model of church.[32] We have not, in most mainstream churches at least, found ways of allowing Paul's contributive principles (1 Cor. 14:26ff.) to shape our regular meetings. Drane complains that the real issue is control: a refusal on the part of leaders (mostly ministers) to let God be God and trust his people to minister as God has gifted them.

Our writers have been stimulating, acute and passionate. We've read these and other books in our small Staff meetings, and realised this is the point where all this gets personal. Challenges come so thick and fast one wonders where to begin, and reactions to changes can be so strong it's easy to feel overwhelmed. They say you can tell when ministers stop growing by looking at our bookshelves: when did we stop reading? When did we last buy? Perhaps you can also tell when this all proves too much by noting when we settle for what we have, and stick there. Even John Drane admits we cannot 'go for it' all at once. We have to choose our targets. How might some of this look in local church terms?

It is striking that a number of those who write about worship spend much time in laying biblical foundations; a number also end their books by describing sample worship events.[33] Others – like the ever-stimulating

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[31] *McDonaldization*, pp. 95-6.

[32] *Faith*, p. 116ff.

[33] David Peterson, *Engaging With God – a biblical theology of worship* (Leicester, 1982, Epilogue); Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a*

Grove Booklets – give us a constant stream of examples of how things might look. It's vital to remember that all churches began from very small numbers, that all decisions were hard-fought, and that all changes were achieved one step at a time. What steps might we take?

I conclude with three simple suggestions from St Thomas's for you to consider:

OPTIONS FOR ADULTS

For a long time we tried various all-age activities. Family services, with everyone together for the whole service, are always in danger of being too long – although adults often comment on what they gain from the talks. For some time, we experimented with Learning Together events which were like a Holiday Club on a Sunday morning. The grinding of teeth was almost deafening, and the work involved in finding exercises, questions and ways of learning from Scripture in mixed age groups exhausting. When we moved to age groups, things went slightly better. Last summer it dawned on us that whilst we generally do young people's work quite well, the one thing we never do is give adults choices.[34] So was born 'Options'. After a time of praise and prayer we move into groups: children's groups meet together and stay in the main room (the best equipped and most spacious area, with music and visual equipment available); those who wish to hear a sermon go to another hall; those who would like to look at the same passage in small groups go elsewhere; and there's a room for those who would like to investigate an issue arising either from the passage or from the season. Topics have included GM foods at Harvest, the second coming of the Lord at Advent, fasting at the beginning of Lent, and the gifts of the Spirit at Pentecost, and we have used where possible the skills and involvements of members of the congregation. It's been a huge step forward for us.

WORK NETWORKS

As a matter of theology we've increasingly realised that most of the 'you's in the New Testament are plural; our hope is that when we meet together we will find ourselves recovering Christian perspective and community.

Wired World – electronic culture and the gathered people of God (Nashville, 1998 – chapter 11: An Illustrated Worship Service).

[34] Partly due to our own thinking, and partly to Nigel Lee of the Whitefield Institute in Oxford, who suggested the idea in his Whitefield Lecture *Rumours of Resurrection?* in the summer of 2001.

We're also seeing that Christians are called to witness out there, not 'in church' alone. The first example of people being filled with the Spirit comes in Exodus 31, as Bezalel and Oholiab make fittings and furnishings for the Tabernacle. We therefore encourage the congregation to see their life and work as their ministry and seek God's presence and equipping for it. We now have a regular Saturday morning group of business people meeting from 8 to 9.30am for a simple breakfast. We call it TGI Monday.[35] We realise we are now part of a nationwide network of similar groups, served by a range of support groups, all aiming to shift the focus of Christian ministry away from church meetings to the workplace. It is one of the most significant shifts in recent years, and has provided a real challenge to Sunday meetings: does what we do when we meet together bear any relation to what our members have to do during the rest of the week?

PRESENTATIONS

These have been our attempts to present the gospel beginning with themes or issues, using drama, film, music, readings and a talk. We called our equivalent of seeker-friendly style events 'presentations'. We used mostly contemporary rock music, although on one notable occasion we used classical music and considered the recklessly brilliant life of Mozart.

Lives, magazine themes and films are all good places to start. Peter Weir's films are fascinating.[36] Weir is a storyteller interested in life's central issues – death, nature, friendship, freedom, spirit. Is there a reality beyond our surface existences? What then should we do?

In the usual Weir movie, middle-class and WASP characters are driven by forces they don't understand and encounter something inexplicable and mysterious, usually from another culture (the Amish, a Frenchman, a near-death experience, a loving embrace from a non-actor, the East, and so on). Through this experience, the inadequacy of white, Western culture is made

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[35] The title is from Mark Greene's book *Thank God it's Monday* (London, 1994). Greene's stimulating work is invaluable and continues as he leads the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC).

[36] *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975; *Gallipoli*, 1981; *Witness*, 1985; *The year of Living Dangerously*, 1982; *The Truman Show*, 1998; *Dead Poets Society*, 1989; *Green Card*, 1990; *Fearless*, 1993.

clear. The mysterious confronts the individual, for which the typical, rational patterns of understanding prove ineffective.[37]

In short, Weir's films aim to awaken a sense of wonder – of otherness. They

> Harken back to the seminal description of the sacred in Rudolf Otto's *Idea of the Holy*. In that book, Otto argues that there is a *mysterium* due to the presence of the Other which has two defining characteristics: it is *tremendum* (awe-inspiring and frightening) and *fascinans* (compelling and desirable).[38]

Admittedly this works at the level of what we would call general revelation; nonetheless these are experiences of the sacred, and potential stepping stones to the gospel.

In our presentations, we had to work hard at the balance between striving for excellence[39] and being authentic, which was our way of saying we would build what we could do around who we have and what gifts they bring. By far the greatest challenge was whether the congregation would bring or even invite friends. We realised they needed to experience a Presentation for themselves before they would invite; most did not invite; and some simply stayed away on those days. These have proved very hard work. For now, our explorations have moved to an evening service slot once a month; we realise others are doing this much more deliberately and successfully than we.

Ultimately, these are theological issues, and bring us back to Paul's Corinthian convictions with which we began. Do we believe that God has given us the resources we need to be his church here and now, at this time and in this culture? Do we believe in the God who speaks when we are faithful to his Word, whatever the flavour of the music and the style of the event? Do we trust in the God whose Word touches every dimension of our lives?

In a postmodern era, all cultures are valid: if I am a 50s early rock fan, or a Bristol Rovers supporter, I can be so unashamedly. How much more, if we believe these things about God, may we do whatever we do unashamedly and unapologetically, always looking to hold together around what really matters and to engage with the worlds around us.

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[37] Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: theology and film in dialogue* (Grand Rapids, 2000), p. 183.

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] As we understand the Willow Creek model demands.