

BEYOND SEGMENTATION

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CHRISTIANS, LIKE MOST OTHER BEINGS ON GOD’S BEAUTIFUL, DIVERSE AND SOMETIMES RANDOM PLANET, ARE CREATURES OF HABIT. We like to establish order from chaos, and in so doing, create a story, a system of meaning and being which tells us who we are, why we are here, and where we are heading. There is security in knowing such things, after all.

The trouble is that once we’re established, we like things to stay that way. As Christians, we tend to defend our force of habit, our developed “orthodoxy”, if you like, as “sacred”, even if it might not always be biblical as such. Whether it’s the way we meet on Sundays and Wednesdays, or whether we raise our hands in worship, whether it’s what we choose to wear, or whether or not we listen to “secular” music, we presume that we’re treading the right path, because, for better or worse, that’s the way we’ve always done it.

Jesus, of course, had a habit, too ... of turning things on their heads. The unsuspecting Pharisees, who had become faithful experts in their own religious culture, must have been taken aback to find themselves the butt of so many parables. And for those with ears to hear, it’s surely worth asking at any point in history whether we are following Jesus’ path, or whether we’ve got so used to the way we like things that we’re back on the wider track.

At this particular crossroads in history, when everything is being commodified, when truth has sunk into a sea of relativity, when the world has shrunk into a global village and the digital revolution has blurred our understanding of what is “real” and what is virtual, the world feels like a very different place to the one in which many of us grew up. If we were ever planning to re-evaluate how we, as Christians, expressed our collective faith in Christ through how we worship, there’s probably no better time.

We are, of course, faced with enormous challenges: Church attendance is dropping and Christians regularly take a flogging in the liberal media and are frequently objectified unfairly as objects of ridicule. Yet there are enormous opportunities, too: many people are searching for spiritual depth beyond the shallows of our culture; and the collapse in rigid, hierarchical truth structures gives us a chance to regain more of the organic, dynamic, subversive and radical nature of the early Church. To ask again, What is truth? What is Church? What does it mean to be a follower of Christ? And do we really have to sing a chorus twice through after the collection and before the children leave us for their classes?

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► Are we willing to take risks and allow ourselves to be insecure, as we seek both to express our worship more authentically and appeal missiologically to a wider public? Or will we regroup and retrench, and hunker down for a rearguard battle of attrition that seeks to defend all that we have become used to? It's surely those in the former camp, the ragbag collection of new missionaries and dreamers, which will help to define how the Church will come to look in the twenty-first century. Or, if indeed, there will be any Church at all.

As society fragments into a myriad subcultures, Christians have been tempted to do one of two things: either to resist the fragmentation and call for homogeneity, uniformity, universal agreement; or we have gone the other way and bought into consumer culture wholesale – no, retail – looking to offer the best product on the spiritual marketplace, dividing our churches as we go into branded subgroups and setting up the franchise. In particular, some have creamed off their young people, the original and the best target market for advertisers, into “youth churches”, in a bid to make Church relevant to a suspicious generation of young consumers.

In seeking to compartmentalise our worship into exclusive age groups and like-minded communities, we have ceased to celebrate difference, and have bought into the spirit of the age that encourages fragmentation at every turn. Surely, this does not reflect the original vision of the early Church, which exhorted its members not to give up meeting together, to look after the widows and the orphans and to share their material possessions with each other. There is no counter-cultural whiff about simply meeting with the people you like, or who believe exactly what you do, or who enjoy the same kind of music.

However, there is clearly a good reason why some groups have sought to do this in the name of being “alternative”. It's less that kids can't cope with adult services (they'll endure them, at any rate, even if they won't bring their mates along); it's the fact that many white, middle-class men who continue to run the Church can't cope with being inclusive. If you don't conform to a certain type – in dress, in worship preference, in use of language and, indeed, beliefs – then you can't belong. And that's the truth of the matter, like it or not. No wonder youth leaders want to go it alone and are setting up their own services which are more cool and much less cringe.

“All-age worship” has become a particular discussion point, one of those lines along which battle in Church is drawn. This is in part due to the fact that our imagined “orthodoxy” is under threat – things are changing (where are our Christian young people drifting off to? They can't desert us now!) and unless we resist it, things will never be the same again.

But what is “all-age worship” when you stop to examine it? Isn't it, in fact, just the way we've always done things, but with everyone sitting in (and with the occasional musical concession to children, complete with obligatory, humiliating actions)? In other words, the cultural manifestation of our worship does not reflect the various subcultures represented across all ages. It represents, instead, the values, sights and sounds of the dominant group, which happens to be white, middle-class, middle-aged and male – the kind of constituency that would have listened to Radio Two, before it got trendy.

With the increasing fragmentation of culture into subcultures and microcultures, of course it's hard to give voice to all the cultures represented within each community of believers. But is that a valid excuse for not trying? Perhaps a crucial place to start is by acknowledging, at least, that these various cultures are present, and that lowest-denominator “church culture” will never reflect the spectrum of diversity within a congregation. Another important thing to admit is that there is nothing inherently Christian about worshipping with acoustic guitars and choruses or organs and hymns. Both are cultural manifestations of previous eras, and neither reflects the wealth of culture we experience in the UK in the twenty-first century.

It's not a matter of doing things in such a way as to “appeal” to people, to get them to stay, or get them to come in. The Church is not a nice cafe or restaurant, in which we, as proprietors, wish to set the right tone (through background music, decor, ambience, etc.) and keep the riff-raff out. (We want to welcome the riff-raff in, don't we?)

No, we are engaged in something more significant, which is to release human beings into a flourishing relationship with God, which can be channelled authentically through the diversity of human expression – through old and young, rich and poor, the bookworms and the MTV generation, the tone-deaf and the virtuosos.

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In other words, to release people to worship God in a way they can relate to, which makes sense to them, and crucially which begins to make sense of them as created, cultural beings. Otherwise, we put up a divide between what we classify as a “holy” culture of church, and an “unholy” culture which most of us like to participate in our leisure time.

If we really want to defend the ways we’ve always done things in Church and stick to “all-age worship”, then we will have to make the voices of all ages heard. We will have to release the aspiring teenage DJ to play an awe-inspiring set of ambient chill-out music (have you stopped to think just how well-suited certain types of dance music are for worship, recently? Go and buy any album in the “chillout” section of your record shop and listen to it). We will have to give voice to the poet who has written the most beautiful meditation on grace, but who’s never been asked to share it because we think that “worship” is all about music. We will have to give voice to the painter and the graffiti artist; the rapper and the soloist.

The questions we raise about “all-age” worship are simply indicative of the wider issues at stake in our churches. Are we willing, in fact, to be more egalitarian in our corporate worship? Are we willing to be more inclusive? Are we willing to embrace the voices from the margins? Are we willing to let young people speak in church, and fire us up about the issues they care about (much of the present unrest about the injustice of globalisation and the abuse of our planet has sprung from young people, for instance)?

Are we willing to allow the elderly to dispense their wisdom, instead of patronising them with friendly smiles and rich-tea biscuits? Can we cope with – indeed, celebrate – cultural difference in a way that makes people see that their own cultural backgrounds are valid, and holy?

What a wonderful reflection of the true image of God that would be – an image which is comprised of all of our differences and idiosyncrasies, and an image which is incomplete without our own distinct and unique reflection of God’s character.

The alternative, of course, is to travel along the line of least resistance, and go with the flow of our fragmenting society. It means we’ll have brilliant youth churches with excellent music and cool people who aren’t afraid to bring their friends along. But we’ll raise a generation of young people who will lose out on the

riches of relationship with older, wiser people, and vice versa. And, crucially, the Church will not fulfil its calling to model a prophetic alternative community in which the outcast is embraced, the alien made welcome, the forgotten remembered, the poor made rich.

We have a high calling, in which our corporate worship should be more than just ways of praising God on a Sunday morning. It should be a way of life, a viral network of passionate people who are one, but not the same. Who stand out and stand up for the oppressed, demonstrate for love, demonstrate love itself. Nevertheless, our services are good indicators of the health of our heart, of how inclusive, egalitarian and creative we are, or are not. Have you stopped to check the pulse recently?

We need to be practical, of course, and to appreciate the challenges that face youth workers in particular. Much better that the kids hang on in there among themselves than to lose faith in God just because Church is crap. It’s hard, too, for ministers and pastors and vicars and worship leaders to please all the people all of the time. But that’s still no reason to neglect creativity in our worship, and to stifle or ignore the creativity of young people, who have so much to offer.

I want to worship with different people of different backgrounds and cultures. I am slowly understanding that there is so much more to learn through difference – cultural, theological, practical, spiritual. I’m even happy to worship with white, middle-aged, middle-class men (after all, I’m going to be one soon). But let’s dream colourful, diverse dreams for a community which represents more than just the people who happen to be in charge. Then who knows? In a few years, we might have a Church that is beautifully hard to recognise.