



Pop Spirituality or Genuine Story?

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WE HEAR OR SEE THE WORD SPIRITUALITY THROWN AROUND FREQUENTLY IN conversations and in the media these days, but that term has become so ambiguous as to be meaningless.¹ How would the various forms of popular spirituality in our culture compare with the faith of Christians? And what might that comparison mean for Christians' desire to serve their neighbors? What is happening spiritually in our culture, and how can we best respond out of our love for God and our love for others?

We live in a society that seems to have lost its way and is scrambling to find it by resorting to a wide variety of spiritualities. As one type out of many we could choose for examples, let us consider the "religions" presently finding their way

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Pop spiritualities appeal to the spiritual situation of postmodern culture—a culture that has lost an overarching story. Christianity offers the postmodern world a story that is true because it is grounded in and points to One who is Truth.

into cyberspace. Stephen D. O'Leary examines some religious rituals from computer networks and predicts that

we will continue to see old and new religions jostling for attention in the cultural marketplace and using available technology to reach new audiences. If current trends hold, computers and computer networks will play an increasingly significant role in the religions of the future.²

What will characterize these "religions of the future"? O'Leary recognizes the following aspects in almost all of the transcripts he studied:

1. "an attempt to recreate or simulate real space in virtual space and to sanctify a portion of this space as a theatre in which spirit is manifested";
2. an emphasis on the difference between this space and the world outside or other places in cyberspace;
3. "an assertion of the power of language to bring about wish fulfillment through the verbal act of declaring the wish within the ritual circle."

These observations lead O'Leary to conclude that the cyberspace rituals appear as attempts to fulfill authentic spiritual needs now unmet by the major institutions of religious tradition. Yet there is an irreverence to these discourses...; they are ludic and playful, they revel in pastiche and parody, and they make few (if any) cognitive demands upon the participants. This conjunction of reverence and irreverence seems to me to be in some way characteristic of the spiritual situation of postmodern culture, which can neither dismiss religion nor embrace it wholeheartedly, but which ultimately leads to its commodification along with every other product and project of the past that is not doomed to be discarded in the ash-heap of history.³

As Christians, we have to ask why religious traditions are not meeting the "authentic spiritual needs" of these rituals' participants. What is the "spiritual situation of postmodern culture," and how should Christians respond to postmodernism? What are the needs and concerns of those who live in the postmodern condition as exemplified in pop spiritualities? How can Christians love our neighbors who might dwell in that condition? What might it take to offer a Christianity that could be embraced wholeheartedly?

So that we can understand much of pop spirituality and the needs of people in our culture, this article will investigate the postmodern condition and assess the spiritual needs it creates. We will find that one great challenge for people in our times is the lack of a genuine story, one that is coherent and gives meaning to their lives. Bear with me as we trace the roots and some of the aspects of postmodernity in order to see what the Christian community can be in the midst of it and what we have to offer in terms of the larger story that we all need and that calls forth wholehearted commitment.

²Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64/4 (1996) 805-6.

³Ibid., 803.

I. THE MOVEMENT TO POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is rapidly spreading throughout the world and has entered every major aspect of contemporary life. Though it was once confined to philosophy, art, and literature faculties, now young children especially experience and react to postmodern conditions, and even the sciences are bearing effects of postmodern thinking. Recently at a small college in Washington State, a guest lecturer insisted that Newtonian physics (emphasizing such natural laws as the law of gravity) was simply the product of male oppression (a typical postmodern tenet) and should, therefore, be replaced by an openness to other perspectives. A female professor responded that perhaps, then, this lecturer should demonstrate non-Newtonian physics by jumping *up* from the edge of a twenty-story building!

We are not concerned so much here with the philosophical and academic manifestations of postmodernism, but with the effects of postmodern thinking on the average person, on the attitudes of those to whom the Christian community seeks to minister. My remarks will not detail aspects of the condition itself, but will paint a broad picture of the general social fabric so that we can then consider what Christianity has to offer in response and what leaders of churches can do to prepare their congregants for mission in the postmodern world.

We can best understand the present postmodern condition by tracing its roots in three particular themes of premodernity and modernity. This is not to be reductionistic about the complexities of postmodernity, but because it will be especially helpful for our purposes here to focus simply on each epoch's understanding of God, authority, and truth.⁴

In the premodern world, everyone believed in some sort of god or gods. It is critical for understanding the massive world change of the modern epoch to recognize that, prior to the European age of enlightenment which ushered it in, all cultures were focused around gods, on the recognition of some force of the supernatural. Moreover, in premodernity those who claimed knowledge of the culture's gods functioned as the society's authorities. They taught the laypeople what needed to be done to worship or appease the gods, so they were the agents who passed on the truth. Truth was understood as absolute because it came from god, and it was thought to be reliably transmitted by the shaman, priest, or witch doctor.

The development in the enlightenment of science and reason (partly to avoid the religious wars destroying Europe) moved the focus of cultures from the super-

⁴Some excellent resources for further study of postmodernism and how the Christian faith can respond to it are Brian D. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow* (New York: Cambridge University, 1996); Anthony Thistlethwaite, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation, and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); John O'Neill, *The Poverty of Postmodernism* (Boston: Routledge, 1995); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); Merold Westphal, *Appropriating the Postmodernists* (Bloomington: Indiana University, forthcoming, based on a faculty seminar at Calvin College).

natural to the natural. The locus of authority shifted from persons who passed on the truth of god to the scientific method, which objectively discovered the truths of the natural world. Because many people had only had a “god of the gaps” (that is, that anything not otherwise understood was attributed to God) before the onslaught of scientific disproof, they thought they had decreasing need for the God of the Bible (although the first scientists were, generally, faithful Christians). With the progressive rise of technology, human beings thought increasingly that they could control their own futures, that with just the right technological fix they could solve all their problems. Consequently, a “tower of Babel” was built on the ground floor of science, with technology and economics comprising the next two floors. Science provided the insights, technology the power, and economics the wealth to combat ignorance, superstition, and poverty in a never-ceasing spiral of progress.⁵ Human beings insisted on their autonomy, and all truth, besides what could be scientifically determined, became relative. Now God was no longer absolute, and religion was marginalized to the private sphere. People could simply say, “Christianity might be true for you, but it is not true for me.”

However, this modern world of science and technology was built on shaky foundations, without adequate checks on who controlled the power. The euphoria of the myth of progress began to give way to the despair and hopelessness of grave anxiety as the twentieth century unfolded into major world wars, severe economic depressions, the violence of Hitler, the world-changing terror of Hiroshima, the assassinations of leaders and massive betrayals by government in the United States, the environmental destruction and relentless dread of the Cold War, and the recent frenzy of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda-Burundi and the former Yugoslavia. Through all these graphic contradictions to “progress” the move to postmodernism has accelerated.

Postmodern theorists recognize that science had degenerated into a scientism that needed to be deconstructed. Technicism and economism also were idols, as were the grand narratives of truth, justice, freedom, and beauty. All these gods must be debunked; their proponents must be unmasked for the oppressive authorities that they are as they use these narratives merely to gain power. Deconstruction leads to a playfulness in the haphazard use of forms, a loss of meaning, a rejection of any fixed point of reference. Postmodern art uses a mixture of different methods and modes ironically juxtaposed; its literature uses amalgamations of style, genre, and even typeface in the printing.⁶ Channel surfing with the remote control illustrates the postmodern condition: from a distance the viewer experiences no plot, but merely disconnected images and smatterings of feelings.

As many scholars in the United States have noticed, postmodernism has moved young people from the alienation of the 1960s to the schizophrenia or

⁵Some of my general understanding of postmodernity and specifically this image of the tower of Babel came from J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

⁶See especially Philip Sampson, “The Rise of Post-Modernity,” *Faith and Modernity*, ed. Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, and Chris Sugden (Oxford: Regnum, 1994) 29-57.

multiphrenia (a legion of selves with no constant core of character) of the '90s.⁷ Having no point of reference, no overarching story, people don't know who they are. Constantly shifting their image of themselves to fit in with the fads and fashions of the times, young folks especially lack a nucleus of identity, a personality that has been formed by moral authority and mentoring models. Furthermore, since they have no sense of themselves, they are unable to make commitments to another person in marriage or friendship or to a job, a vision, a vocation, a religion. Their subconscious cry often becomes, "Keep entertaining me, so that I don't have to face the absence of my self." Religion, in the forms of pop spiritualities, is merely another technique for entertainment.

Though the philosophers use words like random, playfulness, and banter to describe their assessment of, and approach to, postmodern life, the effects on young people seem more like catastrophe, confusion, and chaos. Lacking authorities in the modern world to guide the formation of their moral character, now children lack basic resources of principled disposition to know how to find joy in what is beautiful, to have compassion for those who suffer, to develop goals for their work and lives. Distorted by the entertainment mentality of their parents, most of the young people in my husband's fifth-grade classroom have little desire to learn, insufficient conscience calling them to civility and propriety, hardly any sense of meaning and purpose in life, no sense that there is any truth except for what they create for themselves.⁸

II. THE DENIAL OF META-NARRATIVE

Perhaps the most important aspect of various kinds of postmodern thinking for our practical theological purposes here is the general rejection of meta-narrative. The term meta-narrative refers to an overarching story that gives focus, cohesion, commonality, and meaning to life. When I lectured at a seminary in Oslo last year, we acknowledged that Norway's meta-narrative includes the sagas of the Vikings; the grievous dominion of both Denmark and Sweden; the courage of church and government leaders, of fishermen and school teachers in resisting Nazism; and, in the present day, the people's respectful relationship to the king, their leadership in world-class skiing, and their careful stewarding of oil reserves for the nation's future. These and many other elements of that nation's story link the people together and give them common understanding of and pride in themselves and their heritage.

In contrast, the United States displays much greater postmodern breakdown as various interest and victim groups compete with one another. The larger, overarching worldview of the United States—including its founding by religious groups, the heroism of the pioneers, the splendor of its democratic vision—has in

⁷See, for example, Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁸For an overview of manifestations in popular culture of the postmodern ethos, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

recent years given way to small stories of anger over the brutality of the first explorers and settlers against the native tribes, resentment against a government that has betrayed its people, indignation toward religion, and fear of the crimes and violence of our neighbors. Of course, much of this postmodern critique is justified.

Postmodernism especially rejects the meta-narrative of Christianity and claims that it is violent and oppressive. It is alleged that in a pluralistic world no religion can be seen as universal. Meanwhile, retaining the modernist elevation of choice as a major value, many persons who claim to be Christians have assembled their own belief system with a mixture of biblical elements along with a hodge-podge of ideas from other traditions, together with a rejection of what they find “oppressive” in Christianity, such as the doctrine of the atonement or narratives exhibiting God’s wrath. Thus, pop spiritualities are manifested not only by people outside churches.

III. THE BIBLICAL META-NARRATIVE AS ETERNAL

Those of us who believe that the Revelation⁹ of God does offer a genuine meta-narrative that is universally available and applicable and that is not violent or oppressive must especially remember that we make those claims not because we stand outside of the biblical narrative as objective observers, but because God does. We agree with the postmodern thinkers that no one can make inflated claims about knowing the truth clearly without the influence of our position in time and space, but we do not thereby give up all assertions of truth.

Though postmodernists reject the Christian claim of its meta-narrative’s comprehensive inclusivity, we believe that the triune God has disclosed himself through the Revelation given to a faith community stretching all the way back to Sarah and Abraham, incarnated in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ who lived among us, and passed on through the centuries by the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The main theme of the Revelation, incarnated and enscriptured, is the comprehensive grace of God given freely to liberate the whole world.

The biblical narratives can be seen as universally applicable for several reasons.¹⁰ The Revelation knits all human beings together because they are equally created by God, because Christ died for all, because the Spirit has been poured out upon “all flesh” and the result of that outpouring originally was that each person heard the disciples speaking in his/her own language. The Revelation of the Trinity encompasses all persons threefold.

⁹I will follow French sociologist and lay theologian Jacques Ellul’s example and capitalize the word *Revelation* and precede it with the word *the* to emphasize it as the decisive gift of a gracious God and the Revelation of what cannot be discovered by the human intellect. Ellul also brilliantly observes, using linguistic tools, that the real hermeneutical gap is not between the culture/language of the first century and that of the twentieth century, but between those who receive the word as the Revelation of God and those who don’t. See Jacques Ellul, “Innocent Notes on ‘the Hermeneutical Question,’” *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage*, trans. and ed. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

¹⁰This is clearly articulated in Middleton and Walsh, *Truth*, 87-99.

Furthermore, the Revelation carries within it counterideological elements—texts that prevent us from siding with the voices of victors, prophecies against Israel herself, oracles calling for justice-building and peace-making, narratives of suffering and oppression that call human dominion into question, accounts of the misunderstandings of the apostles and the contrasting comprehension of the “little people.” Jesus himself is the most obvious element, for his submission to suffering demonstrates most graphically that God does not work through the power structures and ideologies of the world. Furthermore, at the cross he exposed and triumphed over all the principalities and powers of politics, economics, and religious institutions.¹¹

Whereas the modern world rejected Christianity’s claims because they could not be scientifically proven, now postmodernity has opened people up to recognizing other kinds of knowledge and uses of reason. We can address the epistemological barriers to faith (that is, the issues of *how* we know what we know about God) by accepting the supra-rational mystery of God and the community-attested Revelation and by recognizing the reasonableness of the Christian story as the best answer to the existential questions of who we are and why we exist, of what is wrong with the world and what can be done about it. As Diogenes Allen explains,

Christian faith is not a leap *within* the order of the intellect, a leap which violates the very essence of that order. The leap of faith is a leap *from* the order of the intellect to the order of the heart. We leap because we recognize the reality of the domain of the heart, not because there is a shortage of evidence.

We recognize the reality of the order of the heart when we realize that we cannot achieve the well-being we seek from possessing those goods which can be gained by power and wealth (the order of the body) and when we realize that all questions of value and self-evaluation are legitimately excluded from consideration within the order of the intellect. Faith is called a “leap” because there is a chasm between the orders of the body and the intellect and the order of the heart, which can be spanned only by a change in outlook and concerns....

Once we see that the intellect is not able to satisfy the concerns of the heart, and take into account the biblical teaching that God is above the power of the mind to comprehend, we recognize the appropriateness of faith. We may embrace God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength because God is accessible to us through the good God promises to give us. At least God is accessible to those who overcome their resentment of being utterly dependent on deity for their well-being.¹²

Because the God who has disclosed himself to us is eternal, because the story of his relationship with human beings encompasses all eras, because those who believe in him already have eternal life and so share in God’s freedom beyond time, and because the Revelation offers the standard by which we can assess what is of God and what is alien to his purposes, Christians can retain from each epoch what is warranted for our thinking and reject what conflicts with the Revelation of God to us. Instead of a fundamentalistic retrenchment into pre-modernity, I be-

¹¹See Marva J. Dawn, “The Concept of ‘the Principalities and Powers’ in the Works of Jacques Ellul,” Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1992.

¹²Allen, *Christian Belief*, 145 and 148.

lieve Christians can be at the forefront in offering to the world around us a new postmodernism, not of fragmentation and chaos, but a genuine story of community and faith.

IV. CHRISTIANITY AND PREMODERNISM

The Bible thoroughly proclaims and establishes the existence of God and the focal point of human life in relation to God. For that reason, Christians in the present age can still retain from the premodern era its theocentric consciousness. Not only *can* we, but certainly our world *needs* to recover the attention to the supernatural of cultures before the enlightenment, for we can easily see that the massive social problems of the present world are due to human beings' prideful rejection of God as the center and reason for existence.

Because the Bible also makes it very clear that all human beings are sinful and that their perception of God is marred by sin, we must reject premodern attitudes toward authority. Though we acknowledge that God is absolute and absolute truth, we no longer trust that the pastor or priest is able to pass on the truth of God absolutely truly. We acknowledge that our comprehension of God is affected by our social situation, and thus we need the whole creation, including also those who do not believe the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, to reveal more of what we can only know relatively. Thus, from the premodern age, Christians keep the focus on God and believe in his truth, but recognize that we know it only partially and can share it with others not as authorities, but as co-learners.

V. CHRISTIANITY AND MODERNISM

It is modernism that taught us we didn't know everything, so we can accept its turn toward relative perception, though we do not extend that relativity to God himself since God has indeed revealed himself as sovereignly knowing, caring, and saving. Moreover, the scriptures also warn us (for example, in Ecclesiastes) against modernity's reliance on human science and technology to conquer human problems. The Revelation of God clearly exposes the myth of human progress and names as *sin* the oppressions that result from unequal distributions of "progress" and power.

Christian theology gave in too much to modernity. We allowed the rules of science to determine how we studied the scriptures instead of retaining our sense that there are many kinds of knowledge and wisdom and that the Bible carries within itself guides to the ways to study it—with a foundation of belief in Christ as the Revealed and Revealing One and with methods of openness to the Holy Spirit, the counsel of the community, meditation, memorization, submission to the text's formation, obedience, and trust. We allowed modernity to turn us toward entertainment in our worship and toward ministry to people's "felt needs" instead of offering them what is truly needful. In a society of choice, churches became false democracies—for example, in deciding doctrine by majority vote—rather than

communities of gifted people equipped by their leadership for a corporate life formed by the biblical narratives and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Theologians recognize that the tools modernity gave us—form, source, historical-critical, and redaction criticism—are inadequate, for they tend to atomize the text and leave us with nothing that forms us as a people of God. For the sake of what can be gained from them, we can retain these methods from the modern epoch, along with its sense of the relativity of our own knowledge, but the postmodernists (and, even more, the Bible) show us that we need more—for example, the people-forming results of literary, narrative, and canonical approaches to the scriptures. These tools especially help us to learn the genuine story of our faith and how it differs from the new spiritualities of our culture.

VI. CHRISTIANITY AND POSTMODERNISM

Certainly Christians can agree with postmodernity's rejection of the modern world's myth of progress. We concur with its deconstruction of the technological mind-set, of political ideologies, of enlightenment hyper-rationalism. We have seen the failures of technology truly to fix our problems, the destructive use of science for evil ends, the inability of economics to bring equitable wealth to all. From the narratives of the Revelation, we know the source of these defects in human pride, narcissism, and greed.

What we cannot accept from postmodernity is its total de-centering, its reduction of life merely to a carnival, with myriads of consumerist opportunities and entertaining sideshows—including those of various spiritualities. We recognize the logical fallacy of postmodernity's rejection of meta-narratives, since its very insistence that they are violent and oppressive is itself an example of an imperious meta-narrative. Most of all, we observe the emptiness, the hopelessness, the despair, the lack of a coherent story created by postmodernity's repudiation of God.

We acknowledge, however, that there is no going back to "the good old days" of premodern absolute conviction, of infallible authorities who passed on God's truth. We readily confess that God's people throughout their history have not passed on the whole truth of God, nor passed it on in ways compatible with the character of God himself. We realize that Christendom distorted its convictions and authority with disastrous results in the violence it perpetrated, the oppressions it fostered, the suffering it caused countless peoples. In past eras, for example, Christendom misconstrued the biblical formulation of "holy war," which was actually a peace-building notion in the First Testament in that holy war was intended to teach Israel not to fight and not to gain any booty from fighting.¹³ The crusades are an appalling manifestation of human perversion of the biblical meta-narrative.

¹³See Marva J. Dawn, "What the Bible Really Says about War," *The Other Side* 29/2 (1993) 56-59.

VII. THE BIBLICAL META-NARRATIVE AS GIFT TO THE POSTMODERN WORLD

Accepting the postmodernist critique of our abuse of the biblical meta-narrative, how can we recover the genuine story of God and his people as a crucially necessary gift for our time? First we must examine the meta-narrative itself, and then we must clarify how it forms us.

The biblical meta-narrative is the story of a faithful God, of a God who keeps his promises. When we read it in its entirety, we realize that it is different from other religious narratives because it focuses on God *in relationship with a people*. There are many other creation accounts in religious literature, for example, but only the Hebrew/Christian scriptures emphasize that this Creator God is also a Covenant God. As Deuteronomy explains,

Because the LORD your God is a [compassionate] God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them. For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of great power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power. (Deut 4:31-37)

The knowledge of God began with the LORD's intervention in the history of Israel—and from there they discovered that their covenant "I AM" was the One who had created the world.

In the same way, we offer to people in the postmodern world an introduction to the God who loves them and wants to reconcile them to himself. We tell them the story of a faithful, promising God who demonstrated his devotion by always remembering his covenant with Israel. The dependability of the Revelation is established most profoundly in the resurrection of Jesus, for in the empty tomb we see the culmination of God's work on our behalf, the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah, the down-payment on all God's promises for the future.

The Revelation, then, offers a convincing story of hope for people in our postmodern times. It proclaims a God of compassion and gracious mercy, who gives meaning and focus to lives tossed around by postmodern randomness. It announces forgiveness and reconciliation to those torn by guilt and lacking skills for relationships. It describes a loving Creator for those who think they have to create their own identity, a perfect Model for those who have no mentors, and an empowering Spirit for those who think they have to do everything on their own.

VIII. HOW THE REVELATION FORMS US

The Revelation is not a book of rules to give us step-by-step procedures for life. There could never be enough rules to cover all the possibilities, and usually our response to commands is to resist them. Nor is the Bible a collection of timeless truths from which we draw out basic principles or goals toward which we aim. Since the Bible contains many dialectical tensions, opposing sides can draw out contradictory timeless principles, and often people use biblical goals to justify any means. Rather, to modify a basic schema from Norman T. Wright,¹⁴ the scriptures are a genuine story, narratives that form us as we are immersed in them, and then we live out of the character shaped by all of God's Revelation.

Imagine if we found an unfinished drama by William Shakespeare, if we uncovered the first five acts and the last bit of the seventh. How would we produce the play? We could try to write the missing parts, but we would never be sure if we got them exactly right—and we could not check out our attempts with the author.

Instead, we would try to find actors who were highly experienced in the theatre, who knew Shakespeare's work inside and out, who understood all his writings and his life and his personality. Then they would have to immerse themselves in the acts of the new play that had been found. With this basis, they could improvise the missing parts.

Similarly, in the Christian community we have passed on the unfinished drama of God. The first act of the play was the creation, which teaches us that all the people of the world are brothers and sisters—and prohibits the violence toward other people against which the postmodernists rightfully protest. The second act of the drama was the fall, which enables us to understand the world's brokenness and destruction. Acts III and V included the stories of Israel and of the early Christians, respectively, to offer us examples of both disobedience and trust and to demonstrate the consequences of each. Act IV is the record of the life of Jesus and manifests God's covenant action on behalf of the world as the pinnacle of all God's interventions in Act III and as the foundation for the Spirit's work through the saints of Act V. We know a little bit of the end of the drama (Act VII) from the book of Revelation, but what we know of the culmination of the world is only a sketch meant to encourage us in the struggles of the present.¹⁵

Act VI is where we fit in, formed by what we have learned in the preceding parts. Immersed in the meta-narrative, the grand story of the people of God—the commandments, goals, chronicles, poetry, warnings, promises, and songs of the entire Revelation—we are formed to act with the character of God's people, imitating the virtues and deeds of God himself. And we have a great advantage, for as

¹⁴See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 140-142. See others' use of this wonderful idea in Middleton and Walsh, *Truth*, 182-184, and Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 138-139.

¹⁵See Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness: A Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994).

we improvise Act VI in keeping with the spirit of the rest of the drama we know that the Author is still alive!

What a great gift this meta-narrative is! It offers the people of the world around us a story into which they can place themselves and find forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present, and hope for their future.

IX. THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AS GIFT TO THE POSTMODERN WORLD

The most convincing testimony to the truth of God for postmodern people will be the incarnation of God's love by, and the embodiment of his purposes in, the Christian community. Many books about "generation X" or the "buster generation" (young people in their twenties and thirties) emphasize especially their need for love and compassion, their feelings of rootlessness and homelessness.¹⁶ They are searching for genuine community, but will not find it in the oppressive indoctrination of cults or in the kind of pop spiritualities found on the internet. The online medium itself is "constantly faced with the evidence of its own quality as constructed, as arbitrary, and as artificial, a game played with no material stakes or consequences"; online rituals lack "the quality of physical presence."¹⁷

Against this artificiality and the anonymity of computer networks, Douglas Groothuis points out, "Genuine community worthy of the name is largely fashioned out of the recognition of our embodied and sometimes awkward particularities." Groothuis cites Francis Fukuyama's *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, which emphasizes that "trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms...of other members of that community." Groothuis notes that such trust "is not easily established through the largely impersonal interaction of computer technologies." Consequently, those seeking to meet authentic spiritual needs in computer spiritualities will discover that developing the behaviors and trust required "when cyberspace is our primary means of interaction is difficult if not impossible."¹⁸

The Christian community, to be genuine gift to the postmodern world, must deliberately be an alternative society of trust and embodied faithfulness to our story and its God. Rather than becoming enculturated and entrapped by the world's values of materialistic consumerism, of narcissistic self-aggrandizement, of solitary superficiality, and of ephemeral satisfaction, members of Christ's body choose his simple lifestyle of sharing, his willingness to suffer for the sake of others, his communal vulnerability, and his eternal purposes. Leaders in the Chris-

¹⁶See, for example, Kevin Graham Ford, *Jesus for a New Generation: Putting the Gospel in the Language of Xers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), for a Christian perspective, and see Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin, 1991), for the longing of those without God.

¹⁷O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space," 804.

¹⁸Douglas Groothuis, "It Takes More Than a Virtual Village," *Books and Culture* 3/3 (1997) 14. See also his book, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hourglass, 1997).

tian community must constantly equip parishioners for the mission and ministry of communicating the Christian meta-narrative, of enfolding the world around them in God's love, of deliberately choosing and living out the alternative values of the kingdom of God.

The community gathers in worship to hear our story in the narratives of God's word and works, in the singing of Christianity's exalted hymns of faith, in the remembering of our great creeds and doctrines, and in the prayers for God's faithfulness and ours in response. The Christian community also listens together for the Holy Spirit's guidance for our improvisation of Act VI. Then we go out from our gatherings to bring the story we have learned to the world around us. In the Christian community, people left homeless by the postmodern ethos can find a home. In the community's meta-narrative, those left to wander in the postmodern condition can find true roots and a story that embraces them. Most of all, in the community and the community's meta-narrative, the godless can find the true God.

X. THE TRUTH OF GOD AS GIFT TO THE POSTMODERN WORLD

Premodernism asserted that there was an objective truth that could be known by those who had the skill to see it. Modernism objected that truth was relative, that different people saw truth differently according to their own situations. Postmodernism insists that there is no truth at all, that whatever truth there might be must be created by each person. The meta-narrative of the Christian community compassionately demonstrates that Jesus is the Truth, an objective Truth who can be known. We know him only partially, but because we know him we do not have to try to create truth for ourselves.

The Christian story which we offer our neighbors introduces them to Jesus, the Truth, who brings healing to postmodern fractured souls. He is the Way to the home for which postmodernists search. He is the Life who gives us hope for eternity—and that hope “does not disappoint us.”

I believe that this is a critical time for the world and a momentous opportunity for the Christian community. Everyone around us is longing for a story that gives meaning to life. We have such a meta-narrative because of the God we know. I pray that more and more the Christian community as a whole and individual believers in the body will be formed by the biblical story so that we can improvise well—and thereby draw to the triune God the world he loves and longs to save. ⊕