

Life in the Liquid Church: Ministry in a Consumer Culture

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More and more often recently, I have heard or read various persons refer to the days in which we live as a “cusp time,” meaning we are on the cusp of a new age or momentous hermeneutical change. To be honest, part of me is skeptical. After all, it seems this claim has been sounded in virtually all ages, rightly or wrongly, and is more an indication of our egocentrism than any true historical transformation. Yet, at the same time, I believe it *is* true that the cultural context of ministry and therefore ministry itself, is facing a dramatic challenge in our days. What is the nature of this challenge? *A shift from a solid culture and solid church to a liquid culture and liquid church.*¹ I am indebted to Pete Ward, a colleague who teaches at Kings College in London, for introducing me to the concept of the Liquid Church. Ward drew this image of the Liquid Church from a book by Zygmunt Bauman, professor emeritus of sociology at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw in the United Kingdom.² In his book, Bauman juxtaposes liquids and solids.

Bauman reminds us that liquids are fluid. They travel easily. They flow, spill, run out, splash, pour, leak, flood, spray, drip, seep, and ooze. They are not easily stopped. When being subjected to stress, for instance, in being poured out, liquids do not hold their shape. They are not fixed in either space or time. For liquids, time is important because, like a river or stream or brook, for instance, they are constantly in flux. The extraordinary mobility of fluids is what associates them with lightness, even though there are some liquids that are, cubic inch for cubic inch, heavier than many solids. Still, we are inclined to visualize and characterize liquids as lighter or less weighty than anything solid.

Solids, in contrast, are the direct result of atoms so tightly bound together that they resist any interference and stress. That is why solids hold their shape. They have clear spatial dimensions, and because they resist outside interference, they neutralize the impact of time. They tend to render time irrelevant since regardless of what time it is, solids tend to stay the same. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether, but when one is describing liquids, leaving time out would be a mistake. To describe a liquid, you have to talk about when you were looking at it. Descriptions of liquids must have a date stamp. Bauman’s point, with which I agree, is that we have moved from a culture of solids to a culture of liquids.

For Bauman, a culture of solids is synonymous with the culture of modernity. I propose a correlation between the solid culture as modernity leading to a solid church and the liquid culture as post modernity leading to a liquid church. I want to end up focusing on the struggle between the solid church and the liquid church.

Modernity

First, the solid culture or modernity. Michael Crotty, who teaches at the University of South Australia, provides a helpful description of modernity and postmodernity.³ Modernity, he says, claims its birthright as the child of the Enlight-

enment. With the intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Enlightenment meant a radical and permanent break with the alleged irrationality and superstition of preceding ages. More than anything else, modernity is typically described as rational. This rationality is embodied especially in the certainty and precision of science and in the seeming control and manipulation of nature that science makes possible. Modernity evinces great faith in the ability of reason to discover absolute forms of knowledge. Science and the scientific method were paraded as the paramount way in which this universal claim on reality is achieved. It was proclaimed as the path to liberation because it would deliver us from the fetters of ignorance. The goals of modernity were the disenchantment of the world, the dissolution of myth, and the substitution of knowledge for fancy. The ultimate goal was to liberate us from our irrational fears and to establish our sovereignty. To do this, modernity presented to us an autonomous self who was completely self-reliant and very much in control. Modernity was linked to industrialization and production. Consequently, modernization became the process of industrialization and efficiency.

As it is possible to talk about the solid culture of modernity, I think it is also possible to talk about the solid church.

The Solid Church

Growing up in the modern age, indeed, for the North American church, experiencing our greatest growth during this time, we invested heavily in modernity. The solid church is a church based on structure and permanence. This is a church marked by boundaries and norms and rules and dare I say it, decency and order. Growth means increasing the size of the physical plant and the influence of the congregation. Leaders measure the size of their effectiveness, even faithfulness (!) by the size of their congregation, and members locate their identity in the solid church as a sign of duty and responsibility. We resist stresses from the outside as much as possible, seeking either to protect our people and insulate them from the evils of the world or relieve them for just an hour each week from the hassles of their lives.

In the solid church, the pastor is the one in charge and therefore, must meet with every committee, of which there are many, for part of what the solid church believes is that structure will save us. In the solid church, faced with the rise of Postmodernity or the liquid church, our answer to the rise of ambiguity is to resist it by adopting a new brief statement of faith and then a few years later forming another special committee to write a new statement of the Reformed Faith and having them come up instead with a new catechism for us. Solid church is annually sending multiple overtures to the General Assembly that tinker with our constitution, giving us the illusion of progress and the assurance of right doctrine. Solid Church. Heavy. Time irrelevant. Resistant. Rational. Efficient. Certain. Enter Postmodernity and the Liquid Church.

Postmodernity

Now part of the problem of defining Postmodernity is that all of the attributes I will describe here are not really new or particular to Postmodernity. Indeed, many of these characteristics were present in the world long before the Enlightenment and certainly well before the 1960's, which many historians and sociologists generally cite as the beginnings of postmodern thought. That poses an interesting commentary that I will return to later.

Postmodernity can be said to be a refutation of modernity and the overturning of the foundations upon which modernity rests. Postmodernism refutes the totalizing and essentialist, even foundationalist orientations of modernity. Where modernism purports to base itself on generalizable, indubitable truths about the way things really are, postmodernism abandons the entire epistemological basis for any such claims to truth. Instead of espousing clarity, certitude, and continuity, postmodernism commits itself to ambiguity, relativity, fragmentation, particularity, and discontinuity. In place of the arrogance and pomposity of the Enlightenment, Postmodernity delights in play, irony, paradox, and even chaos. In the course of all this, Postmodernity engages in a radical decentering of the subject. It enables a grand questioning of science as the answer to all of our questions and problems and rejects the idea that there are any truth claims that are objective and impartial. In Postmodernity, the world is not necessarily linear or sequential. It is an aesthetic view rather than one of logical coherence where uncertainty and ambiguity are recognized and accepted as inevitable features of a pluralistic, conflicted world but where this presents not only limitations but also possibilities. Now to the liquid church.

The Liquid Church

For this description, I am drawing upon the work of Pete Ward, whom I mentioned earlier and Leonard Sweet, the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey.⁴

Before I get to that description of the Liquid Church, I want to tell two experiences that illustrate at least in part this concept of the Liquid Church. Two years ago I attended the annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry. We met at Mansfield College in Oxford. Pete Ward and his colleagues led us, so to speak, in opening worship. I walked into this beautiful centuries-old chapel at Mansfield College. In the center of the room, there was a station of candles and an invitation to light a candle and pray. In one corner of the room, there was a continuous slide show. The images were of conflict and war and famine and pain. You were invited to watch these images and write words of confession on a piece of paper and place them in a bowl. In another corner there were Bibles and a person was talking about a passage from John to whoever came and sat down. In another corner there was a guitarist who was leading singing with songs displayed with the use of an overhead projector. In another place in the chapel there was a bucket with water and you were invited to dip your hands in the water and remember your baptism. In another section, there was a scene playing over and over from the movie, *The Matrix*. In the choir loft, there was an invitation to pray and meditate. People came and went from station to station. I likened it to a labyrinth on steroids. This went on for an hour, and then we were invited to go to another room where we were welcomed and announcements and introductions were made. That was worship. To be honest, it made me crazy.

Yet another example: When I was in Greece last year for a meeting of the Youth Secretaries for the World Council of Churches, the group visited a church that is a shrine for the Greek Orthodox. The cathedral is located on the island of Andros, and it was moving to see persons of all ages literally crawling off the ferry boat on their hands and knees the little over a mile up ancient cobblestone streets to the cathedral on the hill. We walked up the hill past pilgrims of all ages but including, it seemed to me, many old women moving very slowly and weeping with bloodied knees and

hands. The church itself was packed. There was a line of persons who were making their way to kiss the sacred icon that was the focus of the shrine. Others were lighting candles and praying silently and out loud. Some were filling small bottles of blessed oil. Others were obviously tourists taking pictures. Priests were circulating and blessing persons and talking to pilgrims and praying with them. In the courtyard, families had brought blankets and were sitting having meals together. There were vendors selling candles and icons and prayer beads and cokes and sandwiches. Children were everywhere running around, and throughout all of this, in the center of the church, Eucharist was being led by one of the priests. Everything was imbued with the scent of the incense.

The Orthodox style of worship and to some extent, even what was happening in the chapel at Mansfield College, represent pre-modern traditions and spiritualities, but at the same time, they offer a view of the liquid church.

So What Is the Liquid Church?

Given the parallels to Postmodernity, then, the liquid church embraces ambiguity, mystery, wonder, and awe. The liquid church lives easily and comfortably with paradox and irony and values ardor more than order. The liquid church is fluid and agile and responds to stresses—even welcoming them, for this is the nature of living. The liquid church does not protect its people but it embraces them—acknowledging pain and suffering and sadness and angst. The solid church is a one-size-fits-all church. Accommodate to us or go somewhere else. The liquid church is responsive and does not assume that persons think the same way or should think the same way. Are there universal truth claims in the liquid church? Certainly. But these truths do not come from a hierarchy. They come from the life of the community. The pastor is not in charge in the liquid church. The pastor is less an impartor of knowledge and more a guide for the pilgrim and a conduit for the Holy Spirit.

So what about ministry in this consumer age?

Bauman is clear if not rather cynical about this. He says the archetype for our age is shopping. He writes:

If shopping means scanning the assortment of possibilities, examining, touching, feeling, handling the goods on display, comparing the costs with the contents of our wallet or our remaining credit limit and putting the item in our cart or back on the shelf – then we shop outside stores as much as inside. We shop constantly everywhere.⁵

The shift in consumerism, contends Bauman, is from one of shopping for needs to shopping for desire. Needs are solid. Desire is liquid. It is much more volatile, ephemeral, even capricious.

It is what young adults and others mean, I am convinced, when they say I am “spiritual, not religious.” Translation: I desire God but I don’t need the trappings of the church. I don’t need to belong to your exclusive club of words and music that have no relevance to my life. I don’t need to do work that supports your ecclesial structures. But I do desire a connection with the transcendent. I do desire an experience of the immanent. I do desire work that makes a difference in some way. You don’t offer any of that to me.

In the solid church, we presume to know what you need, and we do what we can to deliver it. Need in this sense is prescribed and paternalistic. It may have worked for a generation bound by duty and responsibility, but it will not work for a generation of shoppers. In the liquid church, we must take seriously persons' desires. Desire is not imposed or prescribed. It comes from the person. On September 16, 2001, following the events of September 11, pastors told me our congregations were swamped with persons desiring an encounter with God, an experience of Jesus Christ. We gave them what we thought they needed, and most of them are not with us a year later.

Interestingly enough, spiritual desire is everywhere. There are references to God and Jesus Christ and faith and belief and doubt in the movies and music and writing of this culture. Spend time just looking at the titles in the spirituality section at Barnes & Noble or Borders Books: you will find shelves filled with everything from Deepak Chopra to Fa Lung Gong to the *Left Behind* series to *The Prayer of Jabez*.

The liquid church takes this desire for spirituality as a starting point. The solid church plays down this spirituality as flaky at best and heretical at worst and instead, keeps to the middle-of-the-road so as to placate as many people as possible. The extremes of commitment and discipleship are discouraged because they threaten the comfortable and the stable. The solid church confuses attendance with commitment and faith with compliance. The liquid church is more demanding, more exacting and in turn, offers a profound and costly encounter with God. In the spiritual marketplace, the shopper will chose the distinctive over the routine, the vibrant over the mundane, the authentic over the going-through-the-motions. Like the character Shelby says to her mother in the play *Steel Magnolias*, "Mama, I would rather have 30 minutes of something wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special."⁶

In the liquid church, leadership will move from reliance on credentials and authority to the power of example. Shopping worshippers will gravitate toward those persons they perceive as genuine and passionate about what they believe. Those who are filled with the Holy Spirit and possess a deep and abiding faith will be sought out. Persons who desire God will be willing to follow these kinds of leaders along a demanding path of spiritual discipline and practice. Leaders will relocate themselves as fellow travelers telling tales of encounters with Jesus Christ and their eyes being opened and recognizing him. The way of the cross will be seen to involve commitment and suffering. The liquid church will grasp a vision of community that reaches beyond its walls and its own community. The liquid church will proclaim the gospel by its very being.

Earlier I alluded to the idea that what can be called the characteristics of Postmodernity are not all that new and truly might be called the characteristics of pre-modernity as well. This comes from conversations with church historians about the iterative nature of history and the thinking that the twenty-first century church has more in common with the first century church than with the twentieth century church. This led me to reading with new eyes the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters. In his fine literary and theological commentary published last year on Paul's letter to the Philippians, my colleague Charlie Cousar writes about the church at Phillipi. The pressing issue for the Philippian church was the significance of Christ and the meaning of his story for the life of the community and its members. Cousar focuses on Paul's goal of nurturing koinonia among the members. "The key to the development of

koinonia,” he writes, “lies in the active relationship with Christ and in participation in Christ’s mission in and beyond the community. What is both affirmed and urged among the readers should not be taken as a superficial Pollyanna spirituality, but the deep celebration of God’s presence experienced amid distress and pain.”⁷

Cousar’s description of the practices of the church at Philippi is important: reaching beyond its walls and its own community, participation in Christ’s mission in and beyond the community, proclaiming the gospel by its very being, deep celebration of God’s presence experienced amid distress and pain. Remarkably, these characteristics sound very much like a church both confronting and embracing the context in which it is called to be in ministry. It sounds very much like the liquid church. Cusp time, indeed.

Notes

¹ Pete Ward presented an unpublished paper at this conference titled, “The Liquid Church.” He has published several books. A particularly fine book that illustrates how Ward hopes the church would both encounter and transform the culture is *God at the Mall* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

³ Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Press, 1998), 183-213.

⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

⁵ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 74.

⁶ Robert Harling, *Steel Magnolias* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1998).

⁷ Charles Cousar, *Reading Galatians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians*. A literary and theological commentary (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 134.