

Digital Eucharist: The Eucharist in Ministry to Digital Culture

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Table of Contents

Digital Eucharist: The Eucharist in Ministry to Digital Culture	1
Abstract	4
Chapter 1: Introduction	6
Chapter 2: Digital Culture & Digital Church	9
Digital Natives.....	9
Cyberspace to Digital Space.....	10
Digital Culture & Digital Communities	14
Christians in Digital Culture.....	18
Digital Ministries.....	20
Chapter 3: 21st Century Eucharist	23
Mass Culture.....	23
<i>The Eucharist as Key in Ministry to Contemporary Culture</i>	24
<i>The Untouchable Rite</i>	27
<i>The Eucharist and the missio Dei</i>	30
<i>Authentic, Inculturated Eucharist</i>	34
<i>The Eucharist & Postmodernity</i>	38
21 st Century Eucharist	41
Chapter 4: Digital Eucharist?	43
Postmodern People, Grounded in Digital Eucharist.....	44
Real Church, Celebrating Digital Eucharist	48
Digital Eucharist?	51
Chapter 5: Beyond Virtualism	54
Sacramental Lifestyles	55
Matters of Form	57
Chapter 6: Conclusion	60
Bibliography	62
Web Resources	65

Abstract

For digital natives, the Internet is no longer a separate space that is entered via a computer, but rather a thread that is woven into their social fabric by mobile phones, computers and technology in physical spaces. As a result, they see the world very differently from any previous generation, and the church must adapt in order to minister to them effectively. Digital culture, of which digital natives are the core driving force, is coming about as Western culture moves into a new cultural era of postmodernity, and as such the church must learn new ways of expressing its faith: change is essential in order to faithfully convey an ancient gospel.

This thesis examines the nature of the eucharist in ministry to digital culture: how a sacrament instituted and commanded by Christ can be practiced faithfully by digital natives. Existing forms of the eucharist are entirely physical, and Western tradition is to compact the whole liturgy of the eucharist into an offline ritual. For digital natives, this speaks to only a part of their lives. For them, the physical nature of inherited forms conveys a message in itself, but the response to this is not to merely virtualise physical forms but to allow new forms to emerge that blend the online and the offline seamlessly, just as digital natives do in every aspect of their lives.

Practicing the eucharist is an essential part of the faith of Christian digital natives as it has been since the Last Supper, but its expression and form must change to meet the needs of a changing culture. What that looks like, and how this is achieved, is explored here.

No portion of the work referred to in this dissertation has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

To digital natives.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Westerners in 2010 are not typically passive consumers of information, entertainment, or government. They expect and demand interaction and participation; a voice in the debates that shape their lives. It is hardly surprising, then, to find that mobile phones (no longer merely portable telephones but always-on connections to a global information network) now outnumber TVs worldwide¹, where petitioning the Prime Minister means a filling out a form on a website rather than presenting piles of paper², and that social networking sites now match even search engines by several metrics³. If the end of the 20th century was characterized by passive consumerism, the start of the 21st is being characterized by active participation and greater degrees of connectedness than ever before.

What, then, does it mean for the church to follow God's mission in a world where the connected are in control? This thesis examines one question in particular - what does it mean to break bread and share wine in such a world? The place of the Eucharist in ministry has been a widely debated topic throughout the ages – while it has often been sidelined or reduced to mere symbolism by some churches, others have retained or even rediscovered the power and significance of the act in ministry to the

¹ R. Rice & J. Katz, 'Comparing internet and mobile phone usage: digital divides of usage, adoption, and dropouts', *Telecommunications Policy*, 27/8-9 (2003), p. 598.

² <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/>, accessed on 10 Mar 2010

³ Of the top 10 sites on alexa.com on 10 Mar 2010, 4 were social networking or collaborative media sites. The other 6 were search engines.

cultures around them. This thesis examines how contemporary⁴ churches value the Eucharist and explores its place in their ministry to 21st Century people.

The 21st Century presents challenges that are significantly different from those of previous times; with the accelerating decline of Christendom and the associated mindset, the rise of postmodern philosophy and thought, and technology connecting individuals in ways never imagined before. While technology has great potential for use in ministry and postmodern thought presents new opportunities for sharing the gospel in relevant ways, both present new challenges that the church must become aware of.

If the church is to take ministry to digital culture seriously, it must become conversant with digital technology; not merely competent in its use, but intimately aware of how people relate to it and how it shapes their lives. The Eucharist is as essential a sacrament in ministry to digital culture as it has ever been, to any culture. However, the forms that have been inherited from the past two millennia do not retain their significance when introduced verbatim into digital culture, and so an approach to the Eucharist that takes into account the mixed-media, online/offline, digitally mediated nature of contemporary life is required. This is digital eucharist: the eucharist in digital culture.

The eucharist is central to, and summative of, the Christian gospel. It binds communicants to Christians past, present and future, welcomes them into communion with God and ties them into the *missio Dei*. It is more than just the sharing of the elements; it is a whole liturgy that is performed by the people of God.

⁴ As modernity and postmodernity are discussed in this thesis, the term ‘contemporary’ is used extensively to refer to the present time (early 2010), while any use of ‘modern’ refers to the cultural era of modernity.

If the church is to minister effectively to digital natives, it must consider the media by which it carries out its work. For digital culture, the message conveyed by inherited forms has changed over time; even using physical bread and wine is now a choice that conveys a message in itself. By understanding and adapting to digital culture, the church can convey the message of the gospel authentically. To this end, a number of examples are given of how the eucharist in ministry to digital culture might look – these are not intended to be taken as blueprints, as the form that any one church chooses will be shaped by many factors, but are given to illustrate ways in which an ancient sacrament might make use of elements of digital culture.

In essence, the question is this: now that the lines between physical and online realities are blurred, how does the church that ministers to digital culture approach the eucharist? The debate must move beyond the online/offline boundaries of the early Internet mindset and focus on how the eucharist can be celebrated as an essential part of what it means to be Christian in a digital culture.

Chapter 2: Digital Culture & Digital Church

Since the very beginning, the church has sought to bring people together with God. In the current debates both online and elsewhere, much is made of online forms of church that never meet physically but search for ways in which the Internet can be used to achieve this end. This is, rather self-consciously but without apology, the extreme; if the offline church is failing to meet the needs of people who use the Internet regularly and live out significant portions of their lives online, online church is seen as the answer. Online church typically virtualizes offline practice, using the tools and media of digital communications to simulate offline church, online. This is an oversimplification that ignores a very important dimension to digital culture - even with daily Internet usage rising, people are spending as much time and money as ever on physical social activities, increasingly augmented by technology. The criticism of the offline church that it fails to meet the needs of people who live out significant portions of their lives online is valid. However, in answer to this, the response should not be a church that makes Christian faith a purely online affair, but rather to build one that can engage with all aspects of people's lives.

A church must minister to people where they are, incorporating both the online and offline aspects of their lives. It is this subtle dynamic that is largely overlooked, and so this chapter examines the evolution of the Internet, the move towards digital culture, and what ministry to digital culture might look like.

Digital Natives

Digital Natives are those who have been born since 1980 and who are innately competent in using the various digital technologies that shape their world, such as mobile phones, computers and the Internet⁵. They are thoroughly conversant with these technologies and do not see their lives online and offline as being separate entities, but rather different aspects of what they consider to be their identity.⁶ They have not had to adapt their behaviour to make the most of these technologies; they have been in widespread use since their birth and have been formative in their development. They do not behave in the same way online as they do offline; one of their key characteristics is their innate awareness of the differences between online and offline forms of communication, rather than attempting to force offline ways of thinking in to the digital space. It is not therefore surprising to find that it has been digital natives who have been driving the most innovative and intuitive applications of technology, effortlessly integrating the offline with the digital as they go about their lives.

Digital natives make up a significant and growing proportion of technology users. They are the drivers of digital culture, and throughout this thesis they are the people for whom the issues discussed here will have the greatest relevance.

Cyberspace to Digital Space

From the early days of the Internet until the early 2000s, the Internet was seen as its own self-contained world. ‘Netziens’ spoke of ‘cyberspace’ and ‘logging on’, they

⁵ J. Palfrey & U. Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 1.

⁶ Palfrey & Gasser, *Born Digital*, pp. 17-23.

used ‘handles’ and ‘aliases’ to identify themselves, and the great attraction was knowing that the people that a user communicated with online were spread over the whole globe, or at least the English-speaking world. Cyberspace was seen as ‘new territory [...] where there are as yet no rules’⁷, and this was reflected in many of the early large websites and literature. This mindset shaped the ambitions and visions of the early innovators and commercial drivers of the Internet, as commentator David J Gunkel points out. He notes that describing ‘cyberspace though the words *frontier* and *new world* have had definite and often disturbing implications and consequences’⁸ – specifically that a very flexible technology was being perceived and exploited in one very specific, Western-centric, manner, akin to that of the early Western settlers to North America.

Since the early 2000s this has completely changed. Thanks to ever-increasing home Internet connection speeds, and the resultant increase in rich media, the increased penetration of Internet connections to homes worldwide, both in terms of number of homes connected and number of connected computers per house, the rise of mobile Internet services and smart phones, today’s Internet users:

do not perceive physical and digital spaces as separate entities and do not have the feeling of “entering” the Internet, or being immersed in digital space, as was generally the case when one needed to sit down in front a computer screen and dial a connection⁹

⁷ <http://alamut.com/subj/ideologies/manifestos/magnaCarta.html>, accessed 10 Mar 2010

⁸ D. Gunkel, *Hacking Cyberspace* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), p. 50.

⁹ A. de Souza e Silva, ‘From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile technologies as interfaces of hybrid spaces’ in D. Bell & M. Kennedy (eds.), *The Cybercultures reader (Second Edition)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) p. 759.

Instead, digital communications services are used as naturally and as innovatively as any other tool; instead of being the end product in and of itself, Internet usage is now used to achieve real-world goals. Whereas in previous years the Internet was thought of as something of a wonder of modern science, it is today considered a human right, as fundamental to modern human existence as shelter, food and fuel,¹⁰ and this continues to shape the way in which it is perceived and used.

The rise of digital communications technology has allowed the postmodern tendency towards hyper-reality to take on a new dimension. Postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard describes three levels of simulacra. First-order simulation is ‘natural, naturalistic simulacra: based on image, imitation and counterfeiting’¹¹ – a shallow copy of what is real – as humanity is made in God’s image, we create in our own image and the image of that which is around us. First order simulation is generally healthy; it gives an outlet for creative talent and allows a means of expression for ideas and imagination.

Second-order simulation is that in which the simulation obscures the real.¹² Baudrillard illustrates this with examples from Marxist thought: the workers would not tolerate their conditions if they were aware of the exploitation – by obscuring the exploitation behind production and dream of a better future, the workers would tolerate worse conditions than they otherwise would; the reality of their situation was hidden from them.

¹⁰ Several EU nations, including Finland and France have ruled that access to broadband Internet is a basic human right, and public opinion elsewhere is broadly of the same mind. Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/08_03_10_BBC_internet_poll.pdf, last accessed 10 Mar 2010

¹¹ J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton, P. Beichman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), p. 83.

¹² Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 94-97.

Baudrillard's third order of simulation is that of 'simulation simulacra: based on information, the model, cybernetic play'¹³ – the simulation replaces the real such that the real is no longer the source of the simulation but rather the product. This is distinctly unhealthy, and is the greatest threat to authenticity in contemporary society as it is difficult to distinguish the simulation from the real, and often the simulation offers what appears to be all the benefits of the real without the inherent complexities.

When the Internet was seen as a new frontier, the trend was for its contents to be of third order simulation – but the recent shift away from early Internet perspectives, especially among digital natives, has led to a resistance against this. Rather than allowing the simulated environment to replace reality, Internet users are using it to enhance reality. They use the tools that digital communications technology provide to carry out genuine, authentic relationships with one another, to interact with their environment as location-aware devices become more popular, and express themselves through first-order simulation. The temptation to succumb to third-order simulation is always present, but this has rapidly become tiring and unfulfilling for many users. Digital natives do not see a blog or a social network profile as an attempt at a true online representation of a person (i.e., a third-level simulation taking the place of the real person) but rather as a creative work – a first-order simulation of the author, based upon the persona that the author wishes to share with the world. This is not true of all blogs, or all readers however; Michael Frost describes blogs as:

another form of hyper-reality [...] [in that] it looks like
we're meeting people via the Web, but really we're meeting

¹³ J. Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Science Fiction', *Science Fiction Studies*, 18/3 (1991), p. 309.

only the acceptable persona that they want displayed to the world.¹⁴

What the digital native sees as a creative work, Frost and many others see as a simulation that is attempting to take the place of the real person online. It is therefore crucial that in its ministry to digital culture, the church is careful to ensure that its own online presence is a creative work that points to rather than obscures or even attempts to replace the gospel message, and that when dealing with the online creations of digital natives, it is sensitive to the link between the online and the offline components of their lives.

This integration of the online and offline into the lives of digital natives is central to their existence, but so far the debates in the church have ignored it, focusing instead on the dipolar online vs offline extremes. Partially this is doubtless due to the ease of comprehending these extremes and the tendency of modern thought to rationalize and compartmentalize, but this should be challenged. Nonetheless it is clear that digital communications technologies are essential media for the church to use in its ministry to digital culture in real and relevant ways.

Digital Culture & Digital Communities

Before the Internet, there were bulletin boards (BBSes) – computers that users could dial up to and leave messages for other users to read, either publicly or privately. It was only natural that as this network of BBSes grew and spawned the

¹⁴ M. Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), pp. 87-88.

early Internet its most common use was to exchange messages between people, either through email or in public spaces. As the Internet grew, this phenomenon of online communities grew with it, bringing many of the traits of BBSes along with it – worldwide groups of strangers, often brought together by a mutual interest, communicating online, only meeting offline if convenient or sufficiently motivated to do so. It was common for a BBS user to be the only one in their neighborhood, so connecting to BBSes was naturally akin to connecting to a whole new world.

In the late 1980s, MIT's Sherry Turkle researched community building in MUDs¹⁵ (online games where users would come together online to play text-based games in a shared environment). She found that although users often signed up simply to play the game, many became more interested in the social aspects of the environment and remained part of the game simply to explore their character – in the words of one player: 'I began with an interest in "hack and slay" but then I stayed to chat'¹⁶. Many players would role-play fictitious characters to approach the challenges of the game in a different way, and would stay in these characters for all their interactions in the game. Modern virtual worlds build on the social aspects on MUDs (and their technological successors MMORPGs¹⁷) but without the explicit role-playing. Conceptually they are a combination of several other technologies: they share the openness and relative anonymity of chat rooms, the graphics and world-simulation of MMORPGs, the social aspect of social networking sites and have an additional creative dimension. Additionally, they allow users to explore a completely

¹⁵ Multi-User Dungeons. The term 'Dungeon' refers to the historical roots of these games in the popular offline role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons.

¹⁶ S. Turkle, *Life On The Screen: Identity In The Age Of The Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 182.

¹⁷ Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. An MMORPG will often have tens of thousands of users connected simultaneously and employ rich graphics in the interface, whereas a MUD would often only support tens to hundreds and use a textual interface.

virtual world and interact with each other and each other's creations, publicly and privately, in different ways.

Much of the debate on online church focuses on church in virtual worlds. Virtual worlds and avatars within them are an opportunity for individuals to engage in identity play, which is recognized as an important part of identity formation¹⁸, and the nature of the environment allows space for what psychoanalyst Erik Erikson calls a psychosocial moratorium¹⁹ – a time and place where intense relationships and interaction can take place but without the consequences that would normally accompany them.

There are still signs of the Internet's BBS and MUD heritage, but these have become less noticeable as technology has moved on, and a new generation of people have come online. Today's most popular websites connect people together with the people that are already in their lives, and the latest mobile technology connects people together with their environment in ways that have never been possible before.

In line with the Internet being seen as the next frontier, the tendency of users and commentators alike has been to apply an offline model of community to online meeting places and, as such, places of community building. In her essay *Community In The Abstract*²⁰, Michelle Willson explores the nature of online community. In her introduction, she finds that, paradoxically for a time of such great connectedness, 'the postmodern individual [...] is feeling increasingly isolated and is searching for new

¹⁸ E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1963), p. 52.

¹⁹ Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, p. 262.

²⁰ M. Willson, 'Community In The Abstract: A political and ethical dilemma?' in D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy (eds.) *The Cybercultures Reader, Second Edition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 213-224.

ways to understand and experience meaningful togetherness²¹. This is an opportunity for the church, as one of its core competencies should be the ability to bring people together and build community. Willson observes that participants in the WELL²² regularly meet for face-to-face activities, while the team behind the Church Of Fools project²³ found that it ‘spawned hundreds of physical meetings round the world – mainly tucked away in the corner of bars and pubs.’²⁴. The art website deviantART encourages members to meet locally at devMEETs, and these form the basis of communities that move seamlessly between the online and offline media. It appears that the natural tendency of an online community is to spawn local, physical meetings that share in a larger online experience.

Willson ultimately concludes that virtual communities tend to:

A ‘thinning’ of the complexities of human engagement to the level of one-dimensional transactions and a detaching of the user from the political and social responsibilities of the ‘real space’ environment.²⁵

In contrast, social commentator Clay Shirky describes how digital culture has woven technology into its social fabric, noting that:

²¹ Willson, ‘Community’, p. 213.

²² The WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link) was one of the first social network websites, having grown out of an early BBS.

²³ The Church Of Fools was a 3D simulated church project that ran in the summer of 2004. It proved very popular and was not continued partially due to resource limitations. It was part-funded by the Methodist Church of Great Britain, and was indirectly involved in the creation of St Pixels, which has so far run for three years.

²⁴ <http://churchoffools.com/got-questions/conventional.html> , Last accessed 29 Dec 2009

²⁵ Willson, ‘Community’, p. 223.

The tools that a society uses to create and maintain itself are as central to human life as a hive is to bee life. [T]he hive is [...] part of the colony, both shaped by and shaping the lives of its inhabitants, [...] a social device, a piece of bee information technology that provides a platform, literally, for the communications and coordination that keeps the colony viable. Individual bees can't be separated from the colony or from their shared, co-created environment. So it is with human networks: bees make hives, we make mobile phones.²⁶

The church is right to be cautious of adopting new technology as it is fraught with dangers not immediately evident to those not intimately familiar with it. For this reason the most effective ministry to digital culture will be led by those who are natively familiar with it. The existing church has a lot to offer, but must accept that in places its role will be one of coaching and enabling rather than leading. At the same time, the church must also realize that to ignore digital technology is to make itself inherently irrelevant to digital culture; such technologies are not passing fads, but are part of the fabric of digital culture.

Christians in Digital Culture

Christians have shown the full spectrum of reactions to the rise of the Internet, from broad acceptance to bewilderment, hostility and fear. Many bricks-and-mortar churches now have websites to connect with their congregation and local communities, while other groups have ventured into virtual worlds and on to social networking sites. A number of non-church Christian-centric websites are well-

²⁶ C. Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 17.

established, ranging from general discussion forums to dating websites and niche interest groups.

The potential to connect with people all over the world has been seized by churches and individual Christians as a way to explore the faith of other churches and to partner with and encourage them. It has also become an important way of supporting and keeping in touch with those who are geographically separated from the rest of the church family; it is common for missionaries to use the Internet to be included in week-to-week church life in ways that have not previously been possible.

There has been concern among Christians that the Internet offers ready and uncontrolled access to material that is potentially damaging to discipleship, from pornography to violence and challenging ideas, convincingly put, that may tempt followers away from the path of truth. To an extent, these fears are well-founded, as the Internet is being cited as a factor in an increasing number of traditional breakdown factors such as divorce cases,²⁷ however this in turn presents a new challenge to the church – how to engage with people who would be drawn in by such material and show them that there are genuine alternatives.

In *Exiles*, Michael Frost describes his vision of Christian communities in a post-Christendom world as communities in exile, much as the nation of Israel was in Babylon. He describes the complex relationship between exiles and the host nation – the exiles taking on work for the prosperity of the host nation but also critiquing it where it is at variance with God’s standards. He argues that:

²⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/6857918/Facebook-fuelling-divorce-research-claims.html> . Accessed 10 Mar 2010.

[t]he incarnation demands that we neither retreat into a holier-than-thou Christian ghetto nor give ourselves over to the values of secular culture.²⁸

That the church must always consider how far to retreat and how far to integrate with the culture of which it is a part is not a new concept, and the church can draw on previous experience when dealing with digital culture – the challenge is that the new culture brings with it a new means of communication and new mindsets. Thus, the coming of digital culture will require changes of the church exceeding those of the Reformation and the coming of Christendom in order to serve Christ faithfully.

Digital Ministries

For as long as the Internet has been widely accessible, there have been experiments in online church. By 1997, futurist Patrick Dixon was sharing his experience of a number of these in his book *Cyberchurch*²⁹. He writes with an excitement characteristic of the time about the possibilities of church activities being conducted over great distances, mediated by digital communications technologies. Almost all the examples he provides are of offline church activities performed online, such as sermon delivery or pastoral care; this is typical of much of the current and past debate in the field. Much of the contemporary work of churches online still seeks to replicate the offline; the churches in Second Life appear similar to typical physical church buildings.

²⁸ Frost, *Exiles*, p. 15.

²⁹ P. Dixon, *Cyber Church: Christianity And The Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1997)

Written just over a decade later, Douglas Estes's *SimChurch* has given an insight into a number of pioneering online churches: their work, the issues that they face and how they minister to the people they work with. Notably, the majority of the work that Estes examines is completely online, in virtual worlds such as Second Life, or in other online community settings. Conceptually, this is a small progression from the work that Dixon examined – rather than offline churches carrying out their business online, online churches have sought to replicate all the functions of offline churches, online. Estes notes that online churches are only just starting to come 'out of their shells'³⁰; that is, break away from the offline churches that have birthed them and take on identities in their own rights.

Towards the end of *SimChurch*, Estes discusses the future of online church; he quotes former NZ Bible Society CEO Mark Brown in describing the online world as a mission field³¹, and talks of church planting and being an adventurous colony, dwelling among those who inhabit virtual worlds. This language is reminiscent of that of the early Internet pioneers – describing the Web as a new frontier, a place to be colonized, and as such these churches are likely to find favour among those generations – those coming online who see the Internet in this way. Digital natives, however, are more likely to find such ministries to be lacking in depth, as they will only manifest themselves in one part of their lives. For them Christian faith is a whole-of-life experience, and a ministry that is entirely online misses out a large part of any digital native's existence.

³⁰ D. Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 107.

³¹ Estes, *SimChurch*, p. 226.

Digital culture lives its life both online and offline, moving seamlessly between the two. If the church is to minister effectively in such a culture, it too must consider how it can operate in such a way. This means considering what aspects of its life should be online and which should be offline, and the significance of the choice of medium for each. Those elements that are taken online should be authentic to their medium rather than simply virtualized copies of the offline version, and likewise those elements that are expressed physically should be authentic to the place of the physical in digital culture, rather than simply retaining physical forms from a now-passed physical age.

Chapter 3: 21st Century Eucharist

The eucharist is central to, and summative of, the Christian gospel. It brings communicants together with Christians past, present and future, welcomes them into communion with God and ties them into the *missio Dei*. It is more than just the sharing of the elements; it is a whole liturgy that is performed by the people of God. In order to explore how the eucharist fits into ministry to digital culture, it is important to first review how the church is responding to the wider changes in contemporary culture.

Mass Culture

Pete Ward's *Mass Culture*³² is a collection of essays by church leaders and academics of broadly Anglican backgrounds from across the globe, writing about the place and perceptions of the eucharist among a selection of churches that have formed with the desire to experiment with what it means to be church. While the Anglican bias of the authors, and therefore much of the debate, is obvious, it is not inappropriate as much of the pioneering work in online church has been done by the Anglican Church, or theologically similar denominations. Further, the traditional eucharistic sensibility of the Anglican Church highlights the key points in the wider debate that those of broader Protestant backgrounds often find uncomfortable and which may be barriers to their accepting change.

³² P. Ward (ed), *Mass Culture: The Interface of Eucharist and Mission* (2nd Ed.) (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008)

All the churches described in *Mass Culture* primarily minister to their members through offline means. Whether this is an intentional reaction to the negative effects of an increasingly online society as described in the previous chapter, or a reluctance to embrace the best of digital culture will be known only to the churches involved – what is certain, however, is that not considering this issue will limit any church’s ability to minister to digital culture. Partially this is due to the age of the work; many of the changes in culture described earlier have come about since the first edition was published in 1999. Some of them have their roots in the alt.worship movement, others are pioneering ministries by mainline churches, still others are completely independent of any major institution. All of them are experimenting with new ways of being church and are reflecting on what it means to be the people of God in their own contexts.

A number of key themes emerge throughout *Mass Culture* and these serve to guide the discussion that follows.

The Eucharist as Key in Ministry to Contemporary Culture

The first common theme that emerges is the perceived importance of celebrating the eucharist among the churches that *Mass Culture* examines. This is to be expected, given the nature of the work, but the implication is that this is an important issue for the contemporary church. Many of these churches celebrate the eucharist every time they meet, and make it a central part of their corporate lives; a radical departure from the churches, both mainline and emerging, for whom:

[t]he celebration of the Lord's Supper is in danger of becoming tragically disconnected from our understanding of contemporary congregational worship. In many evangelical and charismatic churches, communion is often 'tagged on' at some point either before or after the sermon³³

In their 2006 book *Emerging Churches*³⁴, Gibbs and Bolger find that for the churches that they examined:

[t]he central place given to the altar or communion table has strong significance. The community is gathered for a meal. It is an offer of hospitality. This is in marked contrast to the focus placed on the pulpit located on a stage. Is it a move from the celebrity to the celebrant, from someone who is speaking at you to one who is eating with you and who welcomes you to the feast on behalf of Christ.³⁵

This shift away from the celebrity on stage mirrors movements in society – the postmodern thread through digital culture distrusts figures of authority and those who claim to hold some kind of truth – identity for digital natives is not assigned by family or history, but produced by a continuous process of discovery³⁶. This is reflected in the shifts in contemporary use of technology. While the dream of television was a one-way platform by which people could be entertained and educated to improve their

³³ M. Layzell, 'The Lord's Supper: 'Contemporary' Worship?' in Ward, *Mass Culture*, p. 175.

³⁴ E. Gibbs & R. K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2006)

³⁵ Gibbs & Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 229.

³⁶ D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 69.

lives, the rise of UGC-driven³⁷ websites and mobile phones flatten the hierarchies and demand interaction. Digital natives are content creators³⁸ and the Internet has provided a neutral platform for content to be distributed among peers – those who hold influence are those who appeal to the digital native’s whole self, rather than those who are elevated by inherited tradition.

In response to the marginalization of the eucharist by other churches, Stephen Burns’ contribution to *Mass Culture* seeks to emphasize the significance placed on the sacrament by the Anglican Church:

[S]cripture and sacrament are important because they are divinely given as used and practiced, and therefore commended, by Christ, and even blessed, taught, commanded instituted and originating in Christ.³⁹

Among churches ministering to contemporary culture, there is concern over the way in which celebration of the eucharist has been marginalized; a feeling that failing to place great significance on the eucharist is to devalue the significance of what it symbolizes, and that it is a practice that retains its power throughout cultural shifts due to its Biblical basis. This is significant at a time when many other traditions, with which merely historical roots, are rapidly losing significance.

³⁷ UGC is User Generated Content. Websites described as UGC-driven have a large percentage of their content being written by users for other users to interact with. The sites are a framework that users can interact with each other on, rather than being digital content publishers.

³⁸ Palfrey & Gasser, *Born Digital*, p. 112 .

³⁹ S. Burns, ‘Heaven or Las Vegas? Engaging Liturgical Theology’ in Ward, *Mass Culture*, p. 98.

While there is undoubtedly a certain element of rebellion here, with mainline church exiles being prominent in the emerging church movement, the goal of many of these churches is to minister to those with no previous church history, who are discovering the Gospel as fresh news and for whom the practice of a sacrament instituted by Christ is not negotiable.

There are a number of ministries and experiments in church that choose not to celebrate the eucharist for a wide range of reasons, from issues over availability or roles of ordained ministers to feeling that the eucharist would be inappropriate for their contexts.⁴⁰ These may be radical steps in the context of those churches, and should be encouraged, but should not be confused with the churches that are under discussion here.

The Untouchable Rite

In his contribution to *Mass Culture*, Johnny Baker overviews the process by which modern churches' concept of the eucharist came to be so far removed from that of the early church – while arguably some aspects of the ritual (such as the physical bread and wine) have remained fairly constant, the tone and nature of the rite has changed substantially⁴¹. In the first few decades after Christ's death, remembering Christ was natural for the disciples and others who knew Christ personally – they gathered to share in a meal, talk about their memories of him, tell stories, and remember him as someone that they knew in the flesh. Early eucharistic services were

⁴⁰ D. Male 'Who are fresh expressions really for? Do they really reach the unchurched?' in L. Nelstrop & M. Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (London: SCM Canterbury, 2008), p. 153.

⁴¹ J. Baker, 'Rhythm Of The Masses' in Ward, *Mass Culture*, pp. 39-41.

characterized by celebration and joy, keeping the powerful memories of Christ alive. As early Christendom rose however, the tone changed dramatically, to one focused on a theology of clergy and laity, whereby only the clergy could approach the table. By the 15th Century, such fear of even the elements had set in that people were afraid to take communion for fear of being unworthy, and even today mainstream eucharist services will often focus on sin and death rather than forgiveness and life, if not in words, then certainly in their sombre tone.

As a part of exploring the form that their Christian faith can take, the churches examined in *Mass Culture* are experimenting with different forms of communion: different liturgies, symbols and rituals, drawn from a wide range of sources. As Layzell notes; ‘Scripture is not prescriptive regarding the structure of worship and the place of communion; it is, however, descriptive as we catch glimpses of order and form’⁴², and this inspires churches to lean towards the typically nonconformist philosophy of holding the form of eucharist lightly. Being typically rooted in postmodern thought and without the burden of associating existing church forms with the negative connotations that they can often bring, they are discovering the beauty of old liturgy, experimenting with completely alien forms, and often blending the two.

For ministry to digital culture, this focus on blending disparate forms is important; digital culture blends the offline and online organically, and churches ministering to this culture must do this in their work.

⁴² Layzell, ‘The Lord’s Supper’, p. 183.

While matters of form are discussed widely in the contemporary church as in previous ages, the basis of this discussion is one that relates to the eucharist as a physical act. In *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, Mark Mason quotes the *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*⁴³ in arguing that the eucharist has to be something that is celebrated with the participants being in the same physical space:

Because Christians need each other if they are to be able to experience the gift of the body of Christ in the food of the Eucharist, they cannot just be anywhere when they worship. Because the Eucharist is an embodied, corporate practice, God's people need to come together in one place. They become for that period, if for no other, a visible community [...] by becoming something, somewhere the Church locates itself in space, and is made visible. Only thus can it begin to relate to all in God's creation who have taken the freedom of God's patience not yet to believe.⁴⁴

Whether the physical aspect of communion is the final vestige of the untouchability that Baker describes, or whether it is in fact essential to the sacrament is a key component in the debate on the nature of the eucharist in ministry to digital culture. The choice of physical bread and wine by Christ had great significance in the Jewish context in which it was instigated. Whether this is a significance that the contemporary church should be recapturing, and whether retaining the same physical forms is how this should be done, are central to any debate on the subject. This is a

⁴³ S. Hauerwas & S. Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), p. 20

⁴⁴ M. Mason, 'Living in the distance between a 'community of character' and a 'community of the question' in L. Nelstrop & M. Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (London: SCM Canterbury, 2008), p. 88.

deeper debate than those that have taken place previously over the nature of the elements; to question the very physical aspect of the sacrament is to question something more central than the choice of physical elements.

The Eucharist and the missio Dei

In his contribution to *Mass Culture*, Stephen Cottrell notes that in the context of the eucharist, remembrance is more than just recalling:

The word ‘remember’ is vital here. Like in the Passover, [the eucharist] is not just concerned with passively recalling a past event, it is an invitation to participate in a living reality, [...] what God achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus is now made present in sharing bread and wine. ‘Do this to remember me’ is to be understood in the Passover context as ‘do this and I will be with you’⁴⁵

In this way, the eucharist becomes a sacrament – pointing to something greater than itself, involving believers in the metanarrative of God’s work. The eucharist links the past to the present, and the present to the future in a profound way. This stands in stark contrast to a postmodern worldview that lives in the continuous instant. In the eucharist, Christians find their identity and their roots in the past and their hope for the future – both concepts that are alien to postmodernism. In the eucharist, that metanarrative is the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. As the cliché goes, ‘The church of God doesn’t have a mission, the God of mission has a church’.

⁴⁵ S. Cottrell, ‘Parable and Encounter: Celebrating the Eucharist Today’ in Ward, *Mass Culture*, p. 58.

Missio Dei thinking has emerged since the 1950s and has been one of the largest shifts in mission thinking since the Crusades. Rather than seeing mission as something that the established church goes out and does to those outside of the church, and the accompanying mindset of Christians going out on mission and praying God's blessing on their work, *missio Dei* thinking believes that God is working in every area of Creation for his purposes, and it is the task of Christians to seek out where God is inviting them to participate. This thinking has accompanied the shift away from a Christendom mindset across much of the West and is prominent amongst emerging churches who have completely rejected Christendom ideals.

The approach to the *missio Dei* taken by N T Wright appeals to the mindset of digital culture as it does not define rules and allows space for creativity, but still connects the church throughout the ages. In *The New Testament and the People of God*⁴⁶, Wright describes how the *missio Dei* can be seen as a Shakespearean play where the first four acts are known (Creation, The Fall, Israel, Jesus), fragments of the fifth act are known (the New Testament), and hints at the ending do exist (Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15, Apocalyptic writings), but nonetheless for those actors who are currently tasked with living out the story (i.e. the contemporary church) there is still significant scope for creativity and a responsibility to be faithful to the story.

Sam Richards explores what it means to tell the story in contemporary culture in her contribution to *Mass Culture*. She says:

⁴⁶ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 139-143.

The gospel is both the story and the telling. Christ's incarnation shows us that the revelatory message and the way it is communicated are a seamless robe⁴⁷

Richards critiques the use of TV and film media in evangelism. She argues that while they are popular and powerful media, there is no way for an audience to judge between a fantasy story and a powerful truth, and therefore the Christian message is perceived as just another story – a true story perhaps, but one which does not require a life-changing commitment. She continues:

[T]he Jewish [...] verb *zarak*, which means 'to remember', implies recalling the event so that all the power of it is present in the now. In such a way the Israelites were told to remember the Passover, by participating in it via the telling of it. In the same way, the eucharist is participation in the redemption of the cross.⁴⁸

For Richards, doing the story is inseparable from telling it: Jesus instructed the first disciples to 'do this in remembrance of me', and they in turn retold the story by living out the truths that it conveyed as a part of the remembering⁴⁹. For the church ministering to digital culture, this then is the challenge: how can the church use the media that are available to it to tell the story in such a way that it is participation in the story, knowing that the choice of media is in itself a powerful statement?

⁴⁷ S. Richards, 'Doing The Story: Narrative, Mission and the Eucharist' in Ward, *Mass Culture*, p. 147

⁴⁸ Richards, 'Doing the Story', p. 150

⁴⁹ Richards, 'Doing the Story', p. 148.

Postmodernism detaches fixed meaning from words and actions⁵⁰, and to the postmodern mindset the eucharist is no different from any other words and actions and can therefore be deconstructed. This is incompatible with Christian belief that the Eucharist was instituted by Christ and as such is given its meaning by Christ. Martin Layzell warns:

We must [...] be careful not to misuse communion in a culture that has an insatiable appetite for spiritual experience. Sometimes it may be the case that ancient ritual, ambient lighting and emotive music elicit feelings that can be confused with the touch and presence of God.⁵¹

While typical Anglican church attendance has been declining overall⁵², cathedral attendance has been growing⁵³ as more people discover:

the mystery, beauty, stability and a sense of God's presence [...] in forms and styles that reflect more strongly the Church's heritage in liturgy and spirituality, and a sense of sacred stability in a fast- changing world.⁵⁴

While this is considered by many a cause for celebration and an opportunity for deeper engagement with those who do not normally attend church, there is a risk of serving the spiritual thrill-seeking nature of postmodern spirituality without

⁵⁰ H.White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course For The Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), pp. 87-101.

⁵¹ Layzell, 'The Lord's Supper', p. 176

⁵² <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/statistics/2008provisionalattendance.pdf>, accessed 10 Mar 2010

⁵³ <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/statistics/cathedrals1995to2005.pdf>, accessed 10 Mar 2010

⁵⁴ *Mission Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. 74.

encouraging true discipleship. Emerging churches are ministering to postmodern people, who are happy to engage in personal, spiritual sacraments such as the eucharist, but so far tend to choose the inherited church for the once-in-a-lifetime observances such as baptisms, weddings and funerals⁵⁵, finding the perceived permanence of the institution to add to the legitimacy of these.

Ryan Bolger finds that many of the churches he encounters have inherited a very shallow form of eucharist from the Christendom church – one where the focus was on the individuals’ relationship with God rather than it being a rite that flowed naturally from the community’s relationship with God⁵⁶. The emerging church found that ‘[f]or communion to be experienced as true, it needed to arise out of a deep sense of shared life together’⁵⁷ – through this, their life as a community was given meaning in Christ.

If the church is to minister effectively to digital culture then it must convey that the elements that are shared in the eucharist tie the communicants into the *missio Dei* – i.e. to share in the eucharist is to share in a story that goes beyond the individual.

Authentic, Inculturated Eucharist

⁵⁵ L. Nelstrop ‘Mixed Economy or ecclesial reciprocity: which does the Church of England really want to promote?’ in L. Nelstrop & M. Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (London: SCM Canterbury, 2008), p. 197.

⁵⁶ R. K. Bolger, ‘Communion and the Emerging Church in the United States’ in Ward, *Mass Culture*, p. 118

⁵⁷ Bolger, ‘Communion’, p. 118

Many churches, in their search for authenticity to the sacrament as instituted by Christ who drank wine and ate bread, have retained the physical form of the elements. This approach is once again being contested; Maggi Dawn observes that the nature of culture is that change is inevitable, and that a ritual or action that remains static in its observance changes because the world around it is changing. She observes that ‘our culture is changing under our feet, and whether or not we wake up to that fact, we and our faith will be changed’⁵⁸. Moreover, the challenge to the church is to shape those cultural changes rather than holding to forms that were created by a culture that has passed. She argues that there is ‘no concrete reason for believing that the early Christians’ experience was qualitatively better than ours’⁵⁹ and that it is impossible for us to fully recapture their experience, as we are not a part of their culture, nor should we try to do so. We ‘cannot have a gospel untouched by tradition and culture’⁶⁰ and thus to deculturate the gospel ‘to a culture-free formula would be impossible: the only means of expression we have is the culture framework in which we live’⁶¹. She concludes that:

To insist on continuity of language and form, then, is cultural blindness – it is to refuse to accept that culture and language do change. The result is that Christianity gets stuck in a time warp, such that it not only becomes alien to those who are not part of it, but it actually changes its meaning for those who are.⁶²

⁵⁸ M. Dawn, ‘You Have to Change to Stay the Same’ in *The Postevangelical Debate*, (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 36.

⁵⁹ Dawn, ‘You Have to Change’, p. 38.

⁶⁰ Dawn, ‘You Have to Change’, p. 39.

⁶¹ Dawn, ‘You Have to Change’, p. 39.

⁶² Dawn, ‘You Have to Change’, p. 41.

For those ministering to digital culture, this is crucial. Digital culture looks and behaves like nothing that has been known previously, and as such the forms, traditions and mindsets that have been passed down from Christendom, modernity and pre-digital culture are, although significant links to the past, no longer necessarily relevant. The truths that they originally conveyed are as true as ever, but the culture that they emerged from has passed and therefore the meaning that is taken away from them will be different from that which they originally were created to convey.

As the Christendom mindset loses its hold over Western Christianity and the validity of other cultures as a means by which the good news of Christ can be announced are acknowledged, perspectives such as Dawn's are increasingly being heard. Along with a new surge in interest in cross-cultural mission, there is a growing realization that many of the rituals and forms of Christianity in the West are both a part of a rich faith history and yet ultimately alien to contemporary culture, and as a result the church often has to engage in cross-cultural mission in its own local context.

The increasingly popularity of this perspective, along with the rise in *missio Dei* thinking and incarnational missiology has led a wider engagement with issues regarding the inculturation of the Gospel. The systematic approach of modernism is to strip away the cultural forms until a single truth can be expressed, and then re-inculturate this truth in any target culture. This is not possible: the Gospel has always been expressed in the terms of the culture around it. The Gospel cannot be expressed without a cultural form, as culture is fundamental to humanity, and the Gospel is good news for humanity at a fundamental level. Maggi Dawn and others are calling for the Church today to live out the Gospel in their own culture, whatever that means – and if

that means getting it wrong some of the time, then so be it. She maintains that the first-century expression of Christianity was no more authentic than today's, and that just because it was done that way doesn't mean that way is inherently right.⁶³

In his contribution to *Mass Culture*, Stephen Cottrell explores clothing the eucharist in contemporary culture. He notes that liturgy is a means by which a story is conveyed, and that for contemporary culture this should be more than just words – it should incorporate all the media by which stories are conveyed, including words, images, rich media and actions. He describes a eucharist celebrated by the whole people of God, telling the story of God's love using the whole gamut of the church's insights, experiences and gifts, and in doing so finding ways of communicating that make sense to contemporary culture:

We usually receive information in a kaleidoscopic variety of dramatic, visual and sensual forms. [...] [The eucharist] is an act of worship that is essentially visual and dramatic, not words on a page but a participatory drama in which the people of God gather around the table of the Lord to re-enact, celebrate and experience the paschal victory of Christ. At the head of the Eucharist are stories – which can be explored in so many ways other than simply by reading – and action – not just the words Jesus spoke but what he did with the bread and the wine.⁶⁴

Digital culture is familiar with relational stories being experienced through a diverse range of media, both online and offline. If the church is to invite digital natives

⁶³ Dawn, 'You Have to Change', p. 38.

⁶⁴ Cottrell, 'Parable and Encounter', p. 67.

to experience the story of the eucharist, they must take this into account. Inherited practice focuses on words and symbolic actions which, while valid components of a diverse-media telling of the story, are no longer sufficient in and of themselves to communicate in native terms the full depth of the sacrament.

The Eucharist & Postmodernity

The greatest issue that appears to be facing Western churches is how to engage effectively with people who are approaching the world with an increasingly postmodern mindset. Digital natives and others in digital culture may not take postmodernism to the extremes that postmodern philosophers do, in that they have not abandoned the concept of truth, but view it as a very different concept than previous generations⁶⁵, and this influences their approach to faith. While pre-modern people placed their faith in authority and modern people placed their faith in reason, postmodern people trust neither – and have not found anything to replace either.⁶⁶ Graham Cray describes this core element of postmodernism thus:

[I]t is no longer possible to believe in ‘grand narratives’, meaning stories that claim to be universally true or the key to all other truths. [...] Postmodernism sees all [grand narrative] truth claims as illegitimate plays for power⁶⁷

⁶⁵ K. C. Dean, *X-Files and Unknown Gods: the search for truth of post-modern adolescents*. Paper presented at the Third International Youth Ministry Conference in Oxford, Jan 1999, p. 5.

⁶⁶ White, *Postmodernism 101*, p. 41

⁶⁷ Cray, ‘The Eucharist’, p. 76

This is fundamentally opposed to the message of the gospel that the eucharist sums up. Cray continues:

[E]very eucharistic prayer conveys a grand narrative! 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again' relates the whole of history of what Jesus Christ has done, is now and will be. Claiming that the gospel is true and that other people should accept it and reorder their lives around it because of its truth, is, to a postmodernist, an illegitimate attempt at control, and ideological power play.⁶⁸

Martin Layzell agrees:

As we worship through the sacrament of the Lord's supper, we are connected to the past given meaning for the present and inspired with hope for the future.⁶⁹

The consequence of the postmodern rejection of grand narratives is that new approaches to determining that which has authority and truth are appearing. Whether by nature or circumstance, postmoderns apply the skills learned in the marketplace to appraisal of truth claims; that which feels good or is beneficial to the individual is bought or adopted. In this context, the eucharist becomes one source among many, competing for attention. This reduces the eucharist to a mere commodity, an experience to be encountered rather than actual participation in a big story; it removes the sacramentalism from the act and removes the ability of the eucharist to point to anything beyond itself and removes its power.

⁶⁸ Cray, 'The Eucharist', p. 76

⁶⁹ Layzell, 'The Lord's Supper', p. 188.

The eucharist stands opposed to the fragmentation caused by the tension between the individual nature of consumerism and the central place of consumerism in contemporary societal cohesion by offering a place in a larger story; by allowing the act to become detached from the narrative, participants are no longer a part of a larger story but simply spiritual thrillseekers. This in turn devalues the eucharist to a mere transitory experience, a spiritual high, rather than the powerful sacrament that it is. Those ministering to digital culture must be aware of and work to avoid this tendency; wherever the eucharist is practiced it must be genuine and sacramental.

In postmodernity, meaning is fluid. It is for the individual or the group to define what meaning is attached to a particular word, action or sequence of events.⁷⁰ This is both a challenge and an opportunity for the church: while it does allow the church to draw on a greater range of resources and existing forms in its work, it also allows communicants at the eucharist to be drawing meaning other than that which was intended from the ritual. Thus, while for the Christian the eucharist holds such significance, for postmodern spirituality it is just one part of a variety from which to choose.

Maggi Dawn recognizes that, given the nature of truth under postmodernity, this raises questions about truth claims. If ‘cultural expression shapes our understanding of the gospel, how can we still say that the gospel is ‘true’, not just ‘true for me?’’.⁷¹ Her response is similar to that of other authors on the subject – ‘the

⁷⁰ White, *Postmodernism 101*, pp. 87-101.

⁷¹ Dawn, ‘You Have to Change’, p. 37.

heart of the Christian experience is engagement not with words, but with The Word – God as transcendent, but met in incarnation’.⁷²

21st Century Eucharist

The eucharist is central to the lives of many of the churches that are questioning for themselves what it means to be the body of Christ in the 21st Century. They are very aware of the cultural changes that are happening around them and that many of the expressions of their faith that they have inherited are no longer relevant, and that by retaining them rather than appropriating them, they inadvertently convey a message that they do not intend to – that Christ is not relevant to contemporary culture. They see the role and nature of the eucharist in the early church not being adequately conveyed by these expressions but are finding that the inherited church is very attached to these and resists any notion of more than minor cosmetic changes. The eucharist has become for many an untouchable rite.

The greatest change in Western society that the church has had to deal with has been the rise of postmodern thinking. While the eucharist ties participants into a metanarrative – the *missio Dei* – postmodernity rejects the authority of metanarratives as illegitimate plays for power, and expects faith and the church to be just one source of authority among many. However, while this new challenge is rising, an opportunity is emerging in that postmodern people are willing to explore authority from multiple sources, including stories, art, rich media and the like.

⁷² Dawn, ‘You Have to Change’, p. 37.

The first edition of *Mass Culture* was published in 1999, before social networking, when even the eldest digital natives were still in their teens. The Internet was still a frontier, and as such the debates surrounding online practice of it were of little significance. This led to *Mass Culture* focusing on offline practices of the Eucharist without placing them into the context of the possibility of there being online forms: *Mass Culture* is about the eucharist in contemporary culture, which is a superset of digital culture, and as such can usefully inform the debate on the place of the eucharist in ministry to digital culture. What follows places *Mass Culture* into context: what is the place of the eucharist in ministry to digital culture?

Chapter 4: Digital Eucharist?

The eucharist is an important aspect of ministry to digital culture, a culture in which the people that are being ministered to are increasingly connected to each other and the space around them by digital technology. What is the place and nature of the eucharist in such a world? This question has fuelled many online debates, many focusing solely on matters of form. This debate has two broad positions – those who believe that online eucharist is a natural evolution of the offline rite celebrated by the offline church, and those who believe that the eucharist requires physical presence.⁷³

Those who take to the latter position believe that the current practice of the eucharist is already too virtual – that the tiny portions of bread and wine, the great numbers of participants, the defined liturgy, all take away from the incarnational aspect of the eucharist, which was intended to be a very physical event in which the kingdom of God was practiced, the hungry fed with food as well as Spirit, a time where souls were laid bare, and thanksgiving marred by sacrifice lived out in each other's physical presence – something which cannot be replicated online.

Those who take to the latter position believe that the current practice of the eucharist is already too virtual – that the tiny portions of bread and wine, the great numbers of participants, the defined liturgy, all takes away from the intention of the eucharist to be an incarnational act – a very physical event in which the kingdom of God was practiced, the hungry fed with food as well as Spirit, a time where souls are laid bare, thanksgiving marred by sacrifice are lived out in each other's physical presence that cannot be replicated online.

⁷³ A classic example of such a debate can be found at <http://brownblog.info/?p=886>. Last accessed 14 Mar 10.

This thesis does not take either position as both extremes and the range in between all have valid arguments; rather it questions the validity of the framework in which the debate takes place. Most people in the West do not use virtual worlds or have a discrete online presence, but do own a mobile phone and have an email address. While the current debates focus on the possibility of an online form of the eucharist as opposed to an offline form, this chapter examines sacramentalism and the eucharist in digital culture – a world more akin to the augmented reality vision than the virtual reality vision of science fiction.

Postmodern People, Grounded in Digital Eucharist

The relationship between technology, postmodern thought and the eucharist in ministry to digital culture is a complex and ambiguous one, composed of tension and unexpected parallels.

A superficial examination of the relationship between technology and postmodernism indicates that the two have a symbiotic relationship: as postmodern thought describes the self as a purely social construct⁷⁴, technology provides ever more pervasive ways to communicate and hence mediate social interactions; as postmodernism rejects the possibility of any one position being an absolute truth, technology gives a platform for the whole spectrum of views on any issue to be published, with relatively little differentiation between them apart from that in the mind of the reader. A deeper examination, however, reveals tension; while

⁷⁴ White, *Postmodernism 101*, p. 73

postmodernity rejects metanarratives, technology allows the creation of almost tribal associations of individuals, with their own story that people are invited to participate in, their own identity, in turn, helping form the identity of the participant.

Postmodernism and the eucharist stand opposed in almost every way. While postmodernism rejects the validity of metanarratives as sources of authority⁷⁵, the eucharist is an act that ties the participant into a very potent metanarrative – the *missio Dei* itself. *Missio Dei* thinking has emerged alongside postmodern thought, and both are still in their relative infancy. Certain approaches to the *missio Dei* are more relevant to postmodern thought than others-One key aspect of postmodernism is the willingness to accept sources other than science as of value and of authority where appropriate, and as such the approach to the *missio Dei* that NT Wright takes appeals. This allows for a faith which is not defined by one particular interpretation of scripture or context, and a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to Christian life being taken, with an emphasis on making full use of the gifts people have been blessed with to tell the story.

When Johnny Baker describes how the inherited church has turned the eucharist into an untouchable rite, he refers to more than just matters of form. What he and the Grace community have sought to break away from is the adherence to unimaginative forms drawn solely from the heritage of their tradition. They seek to ‘no longer imagin[e] the eucharist as untouchable or ‘off limits’’ – they seek to make it their own⁷⁶. N T Wright’s perspective on this - an approach to the *missio Dei* that allows the church to use its God-given imagination to live out the gospel in its own

⁷⁵ White, *Postmodernism 101*, pp. 108-109.

⁷⁶ Baker, ‘Rhythm’, p. 43.

context - appeals to Baker, and many of his contemporaries. Baker challenges the church with the words of Karl Rahner: ‘Accept that every generation interprets the gospel. Then get on with taking part in your generation’s interpretation’⁷⁷.

The question of how the eucharist and digital technology interface is a very recent one. Upon initial consideration, they appear to be diametrically opposed. One is a physical act that ties the participant into a metanarrative, while the other is a virtual medium, a purveyor of instant gratification and a complement to postmodernist thought. There are some parallels, however: both the eucharist and mobile communications technology connect the participant to something larger; both the eucharist and digital technology are fundamentally about connection for a purpose other than for its own sake, and both are media which have an everyday profound significance for those who allow them to. Understanding this interaction is crucial to placing the eucharist into digital cultural contexts.

To see digital communications technology as nothing more than a tool is to ignore its potency, as Estes notes:

[E]ven though Nikola Tesla invented the radio in the early 1890s, it was almost forty years before the world really figured out how to use it⁷⁸

Conversely, to see only such technology’s potential to isolate and discriminate is to miss out on what much of what is possible. When technology acts in opposition to the eucharist it is inappropriate and any work in ministry to digital culture must take

⁷⁷ Baker, ‘Rhythm’, p. 44

⁷⁸ Estes, *SimChurch*, p. 18.

this into account. Conversely, it must be remembered that digitally mediated communication is key to many relationships among individuals and groups within digital culture and therefore to ignore it completely is to risk irrelevance. Digital natives move seamlessly from the digital to the physical, and the church must be ready to minister to them in this way. To them, a gospel that speaks only in physical terms can only be partially relevant. The medium is an inherent part of the message, and by ignoring digital communications an implicit message is sent that God has no interest in people's digital lives - a dangerous precedent. The opposite is also true, however. In using digital communications to minister to digital culture the church must be wary of reducing the powerful stories of the gospel to mere digital artifacts that are deleted and forgotten as soon as they are received. A text message liturgy, for example, is one way of putting scripture in the hands of digital natives. It risks being lost among insignificant chat, but it also has a chance to weave its way into people's lives for that day and beyond.

To the postmodern mind, tension and ambiguity are not inherently bad – postmodernity stands opposed to the modern obsession of there needing to be a single, logically complete answer to every question⁷⁹. Therefore, the place of the eucharist in ministry to digital culture may not require a single answer. Indeed the diversity of digital culture, just as cultures preceding it, is such that a single answer would be a shallow response to the complexity of the issues involved, and thus inappropriate. For some, including technology in the celebration of the eucharist will be an aid to worshipping God, developing a relationship with him, and will end up being more authentic to the intention of the eucharist than a purely physical ritual. For

⁷⁹ White, *Postmodernism 101*, pp. 103-122.

others, it will be essential that the eucharist is celebrated in the physical space – that in lives dominated by distance and connection by a screen, the eucharist can be a place where real physical relationships are made and maintained. For digital culture, the eucharist is the antidote to hyper-reality; the place of the eucharist in the life of the church should therefore be a central one. As technology changes the way that people relate to each other, churches' celebration of the eucharist can be a place where everything that the act signifies becomes real. As long as the practice fits in with the fifth act of the play in Wright's metaphor, the physical forms are less significant than their meaning.

Real Church, Celebrating Digital Eucharist

In the words of Walter Truett Anderson, reality isn't what it used to be⁸⁰. The very nature of reality is, whether consciously or otherwise, being debated and explored throughout society, in art, academia and in the lives of people, individually and corporately.

Baudrillard argues that as technology progresses, the ability of society to obscure the real with simulations of the real increases, and this has been shown to be true in many cases. However, there are those who recognize the danger of this trend and reject the simulations in favour of reality. David Boyle describes these people as

⁸⁰ W. T. Anderson, *Reality isn't what it used to be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-To-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990)

‘new realists’⁸¹, people who are looking for authenticity in a world of hyper-reality and who consider the whole impact of a consumer decision before making a purchase, search for places where indigenous culture shows through rather than where it is reduced to a commodity and seek out real relationships rather than shallow simulations of relationships. In doing so these new realists are no strangers to digital communications technology; they use it in their search for the real, rather than succumbing to the temptations of the technology.

Neil Postman highlights the dangers of adapting the message of the gospel to a technological medium, discussing the great religious media presence of his day – religious television programming. Having studied the religious output of various mainstream television stations in the US, he reaches two conclusions about how Christianity has fared on the medium – firstly, that ‘religion, like everything else, is presented [...] as entertainment’, and secondly that ‘this fact has more to do with the bias of television than [...] the preachers’⁸². The potential trap of any communications technology is that it has the potential to distort the message, not by what is being said, but by how it is being said- With television it was the economic necessity of making shows consumable to generate revenue, and with digital communications technologies the risk is that the shallow illusion of relationships will become an easy-to-consume alternative to real relationships.

Frost believes that Christians should be among these new realists⁸³, modeling their responses to the hyper-real on Jesus’ example of ‘integrity, truth-telling and

⁸¹ D. Boyle, *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* (London: Flamingo, 2004).

⁸² N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 116.

⁸³ Frost, *Exiles*, pp. 89-91.

authenticity⁸⁴, in all aspects of their lives, not just those that are digitally mediated. Real life requires real church. This is the challenge to the Church: not to succumb to the hyper-real fakery of the world that it is a part of, but rather to use the tools that are at hand to follow Jesus' example. In ministry to digital culture, that means using the communications tools available as a medium over which real relationships can be conducted, and speaking out against them as and when they become a hindrance rather than a help. This is as true in the church's celebration of the eucharist as any other part of church life. If communion is to flow out of community life, technology must both work to enhance that community life rather than detract from it, and work within the context of the eucharist to make it a genuine expression of the community's relationship with God. For the emerging churches that Ryan Bolger studied, the eucharist 'integrate[s] both physical and spiritual reality' – thus, if the physical reality of lives of the participants in the eucharist involves a digital dimension, then this should not be ignored; and the (perhaps metaphorical) communion table must not again become a place where parts of a communicant's life are left behind before it is approached.

If the church is to minister effectively to Christian disciples in digital culture, it must advocate an authentic faith – one rooted in Christ but shaped and expressed through the language, culture and mindsets of the day. For the church in digital culture, this means conversance with, and adoption of digital technology not as a distraction from relationships but an integral part of them.

⁸⁴ Frost, *Exiles*, p. 93.

Digital Eucharist?

If the church is to take seriously the challenges of ministry to digital culture, it needs to not only understand digital culture but also be a part of it. The people who make up digital culture do not see the world in terms of online and offline but simply see it as the world in which they live, mediated by the means that makes sense to them. The church must engage with this dynamic.

The eucharist stands opposed to many of the implications of over-reliance on digital communications. The eucharist is an incarnational act, while digital technology tends towards physical isolation, it is an act of deep community while digital technology tends towards shallow relationships, replacing real community with the simulation of community. Digital natives, the drivers of digital culture, find ways of fluidly moving between the digital and the physical in their practice of forming authentic community. Beyond and among Digital natives, there are those who are aware of and are rejecting the tendencies of the technology, whilst continuing to exploit it to further their own, authentic relationships.

The eucharist also stands opposed to one core tenet of postmodern thought: the rejection of metanarratives. The eucharist ties communicants into something that is rejected by the culture around them and this will invariably lead to tension just as the Gospel has done consistently throughout the ages.

The rise of postmodern thought also brings with it new opportunities, and frees the church from some of the shackles imposed upon it by modernity. While modernity either sidelined the church as irrelevant to the march of scientific progress,

or forced it to define its beliefs in logical, modernistic ways, postmodern thought allows more creative forms to have authority; a story or a work of art, for example, may be allowed to influence a person as much as a scientific or mathematical proof.

As a result of this, the church must be careful to avoid local forms that are so significant to the people involved that they may be mistaken for the touch and presence of God. What the church considers a move towards relevance may, in fact, distort the message of the Gospel and ultimately work against God's purposes. Thus, the lesson that the church can learn from postmodernism's dissociation of meaning and form is that what the church intends to say may not be what those they are ministering to actually hear.

The physical and online components are both of great important to the digital native. In considering how to practice the eucharist in ministry to digital culture, the church must examine both the online and offline components that it uses and their significance. The online components should be used as part of an authentic observance of the sacrament, such that by being online they allow communicants to engage with that component in a more powerful way that with that component being offline. Confession, for example, is a key part of the liturgy of the eucharist; this could perhaps be more effectively practiced online prior to a physical gathering than in a few lines of spoken word and a few seconds of silence as is common in mainline churches. Likewise, the offline components should be considered in the context of a mixed-media observance; the choice of that component being offline is in itself significant. For a digital native, sharing in physical bread and wine is a significant physical act, conveying the incarnational message of the gospel, and as such church ministering to them may choose to share in a whole meal rather than small portions,

recognizing that the digital native occupies a world full of symbols that point to nothing beyond themselves.

In order for the eucharist to be authentic for those in digital culture, it must be authentic to God, and must be a way for communicants to come before God in their brokenness and remember the sacrifice of Christ for their sins. It must also be authentic to the culture in which it is being practiced, but not compromised by this. In order for communicants to relate to the sacrament, it must derive its meaning from the significance of the act, but conveyed in ways that make this clear, not only to the mind but also to the hearts of those sharing. Finally, it must be authentic to the medium in which it is being practiced, being aware that the choice of medium and the role of that medium in the lives of those involved will convey meaning about the message that is being presented. For each group sharing the eucharist in digital culture, these factors will interact in different ways to produce outwardly very different ways of sharing in the sacrament. Nonetheless, the inward and invisible grace conveyed therein will be the same.

Chapter 5: Beyond Virtualism

Contemporary practice of the eucharist is highly symbolic, with emphasis on attaching certain meaning to the actions that are being performed. It is therefore not too great a logical step to consider removing the physical elements or the physical presence of the people in the same room. If the ritual is entirely symbolic, then virtual worlds and the Web provide the ideal setting, as they are full of symbols to which significance is attached. Emotes⁸⁵ convey emotion, avatars⁸⁶ convey presence and screen names and profiles convey identity. There is, however, a flaw in this logic: the contemporary practice of the eucharist is not always a complete expression of the eucharist, neither are the online symbols of personhood always the complete person. This chapter explores how the church that ministers to 21st Century digital culture can respond to the traditions that it has inherited, and how it can take part in generation's interpretation of the gospel.

The 'new realists' that Frost describes in *Exiles* are looking for reality in the midst of hyper-reality, and have no time for simulations that have replaced the real. For those new realists who are Christian, the eucharist should be a real encounter, with the people and the God with whom they are in community, in ways that make sense to them as people living in a digital culture. For some, this will mean rejecting online

⁸⁵ Emotes, also known as smilies, are short sequences of alphanumeric and punctuation marks intended to convey the emotion of the writer – common examples are :) to convey happiness, :(to convey sadness, O_o to convey disbelief and :\$ to convey embarrassment. They were commonly used in casual emails, IM conversations and text messages.

⁸⁶ Avatars are 2D or 3D representations of a character in an online world. They range from a simple picture to a full 3D model, and are chosen by users as their pictorial representation.

forms that are a barrier to community, while for others, this will mean a re-interpretation of what it means to celebrate the eucharist. Digital communications technologies bring people together who otherwise would not be able to meet, and have such significance in people's lives so as to be viable means of carrying out part of the communication required for genuine relationships. For these, eucharistic practice that involves a digital aspect, can be more real than the current physical practice of many churches.

Sacramental Lifestyles

In *Shaping Of Things To Come*, Frost and Hirsch note that what 'postmodern people are crying out for is not better doctrine or clearer theology, but simply kindness in a chaotic and haphazard world'⁸⁷. They call the church to take a wider view of what is considered to be sacramental:

Buber is right when he says that "something infinite flows into a (holy) deed of a man; something infinite flows from it . . . the fullness of the world's destiny namelessly interwoven, passes through his hands". Just as the Lord's Supper and baptism are sacraments in and through which God's Grace is made visible and apparent, so is the holy deed of godly person⁸⁸

In *Mass Culture*, Sam Richards emphasizes the importance of action as a means of telling the story of the Gospel. She notes that, unlike some postmodern

⁸⁷ M. Frost & A. Hirsch, *Shaping Of Things To Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 145

⁸⁸ Frost & Hirsch, *Shaping Of Things To Come*, p. 136

philosophers, the “generation growing up within [...] postmodernity [have] not really abandoned truth, nor the search for it”⁸⁹, but find it to be

neither hard-boiled fact nor universal principle; rather, it embraces doubt and ambiguity. The postmodern youth, truth is event – personal, passionate, transcendent. They unapologetically up-end Descartes: “I experience, therefore I know”⁹⁰

Richards notes that in this culture and to this generation (i.e. digital natives) the eucharist presents a story-based medium by which the Gospel can be conveyed, and challenges the church to invite them into the eucharistic community so that they can experience God. She notes that the while the story of God has not altered, what it has been taken to mean has changed. Moreover, while faithfulness to the story includes a legitimate expectation of critique by the storyteller, the listener should be allowed to experience the story for themselves.

If the eucharist sums up the Gospel and invites participants into the metanarrative of the Gospel, and the medium carries weight as the form of the message then the way in which we partake in the eucharist should convey the Gospel. While this may mean taking the words and actions of parts of the eucharistic liturgy online, it may also require a wider reconsideration of those words and actions; the choice of word, action, image, music, or any other medium is in itself a choice that conveys a message.

⁸⁹ Richards, ‘Doing the Story’, p. 151

⁹⁰ Richards, ‘Doing the Story’, p. 151

Matters of Form

To the Western, post-Christendom mind, the eucharist is still largely perceived as a ceremony, a ritual of sorts. The music, the words, the tone, the venue and the physical nature of the element may have changed over its two-thousand year history, but it has remained a ceremony. Much of the debate regarding a digitally-mediated eucharist has focused on what such a ceremony might look like – a spectrum of increasing digital-ness has emerged, and most participants in the debate have a point on this spectrum at which they will find that the digital form is too virtual, too far removed from reality.

At one end of the spectrum are forms that bring together multiple physical celebrations of the eucharist, with groups holding their own services but being linked by technology. The next step is that of one or more individual participants being physically separate from the others, but still sharing in a single service. At the other extreme are entirely digital services, where the participants use virtual worlds to share in digital elements.

While in the more physical forms using digital mediation there is still a requirement for the real person to take the elements, pray the prayers and appreciate the significance of the act, there is no such requirement for forms that are entirely digital. Virtual world are centered around avatars, some of which may be projections of aspects of the user into that virtual world, while others may simply be the creations of their users, with no reliable way of telling the difference. The eucharist binds a community together, but it is legitimate to ask whether the same can be said of projections of the self, meeting with the creations of others.

Christendom has not only defined contemporary forms of the eucharist, but the contemporary mindset regarding it, including what is and is not eucharistic. John Drane sees hints of the eucharist in another significant Biblical meal:

‘The great feast to which all are invited (Luke 14:15-24) is a more authentic picture of the Kingdom of God than the sacramental restrictions observed today by churches as diverse as the Roman Catholics and the Plymouth Brethren, strange bedfellows who are united in their regular celebration of the Eucharist and their insistence on excluding any but their own from it. A central identifying mark of an authentic Gospel community in the twenty-first century (as in the first century) will be hospitality, a gift that invariably blesses those who give as well as those who receive’⁹¹

Questions of form and nature, of range and scope need to be faced by individual communities seeking to minister to digital culture. While Digital Natives may use virtual worlds, they are much more likely to communicate via more personal means, such as social media and mobile devices. Such means facilitate physical meeting, blend the real-time with the asynchronous, and define the terms on which digital natives relate to one another. The eucharist for such people must take account of this, by challenging those aspects of digital culture that tend towards shallow relationships and embracing those that drive genuine community. For some churches (in the wider sense, i.e., those Christians in a certain city or locality), a flash mob⁹²

⁹¹ J. Drane, *After McDonaldization: Mission, ministry and Christian discipleship in an age of uncertainty* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), p. 54.

⁹² Flash mobs were a late-2000s phenomenon of masses of young people notified at short notice, by text or social media, to assemble at an arranged point and carry out a benign but noticeable stunt, such as pillow fighting in a public square, or mass

communion might be a vibrant and creative public display of Christian faith and unity, for others it would simply be a gimmicky stunt. Similarly, a geocached communion might help bind naturally disparate communities together, for others it would be an excuse to give up their rare but valuable physical meetings.

worship of a supermarket. They typically lasted for a matter of minutes and the participants dispersed promptly.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Digital communications technology is approaching the point of ubiquity in the Western world, and with it comes a completely new mindset. Driven by postmodern thought, modern heritage and digital technology, digital culture is becoming increasingly widespread. Most people immersed in, and conversant with digital culture are digital natives – individuals born since 1980, who have grown up around digital communications technology, and who have never experienced a world without it. It is to these people that the church is increasingly ministering, but to do so effectively requires a conversance with both digital culture and digital technology, and it is this which the contemporary church often lacks. Moreover, it must be noted that digital natives move seamlessly between the online and the offline, integrating elements of each in the other as appropriate, and allowing the two to interact naturally.

The eucharist is central to, and summative of, the Christian gospel. It binds communicants to Christians past, present and future, welcomes them into communion with God and ties them into the *missio Dei*. It is central to Christian ministry, but its interaction with digital culture is complex: in some ways opposed, in others complimentary. What is certain, is that the forms of the eucharist that have been handed down through the last few centuries are of limited relevance to digital culture, and to cling to man-made forms as if they were scripture is to convey a message that is opposed to the gospel – that is, that Christ is not relevant to contemporary culture.

Much of the current debate focuses on the extremes: between the entirely physical forms of the eucharist, both inherited and more inventive, and the entirely online forms that are being discussed and experimented with. Both extremes have valid points, but the framework of the argument is only tangentially relevant to digital culture. Digital natives move naturally between the online and offline to the point where there is no longer a distinction. The question for the church ministering to digital culture is, therefore, what the role of the eucharist really is in a culture where the online and offline interweave.

An authentic eucharistic practice for digital culture is one that ties the whole life of the communicant into the *missio Dei*. The eucharist is a whole liturgy that has traditionally been compacted into a short ritual, but this is not necessarily the most appropriate way for the sacrament to be practiced in digital culture. When considering eucharistic practice for digital culture, the church should consider which parts should be offline, and design them to fit into their new context as part of a mixed-media practice, and which parts should be online, likewise designing them to integrate with the offline. By allowing the online and offline to interact rather oppose, the church can minister to the whole of the digital native. This is the digital eucharist: the eucharist in digital culture.

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