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WW '72: CHAPTER 4 WHAT'S NEW? WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY?

I. SINGING A NEW SONG: CULT AND CONTEMPORANEITY

“Sing unto the Lord a **NEW** song,” says the psalmist; and I hope I have made quite clear by now that does *not* mean we must stop singing the *old* songs. Just because a form is old does not make it bad or even automatically irrelevant, any more than being contemporary makes it automatically good — or automatically pertinent! But there are at least three good reasons why the Church must take the contemporary culture into account in worship, as in the rest of our common life.

First, there's the **PRACTICAL** reason: We'll die if we don't. We are living in the midst of swirling change. The church's worship must change too, or we'll end up a relic.

Second, the **HISTORICAL** reason: We cannot hope to freeze history. We cannot recapture last year's cultural forms, any more than we can recapture First Century Christianity or Sixteenth Century Christianity. It is impossible to duplicate past experience. You Can't Go Home Again. Home has already changed. Home is Now.

Finally, the **ETHICAL** reason: It would be unfaithful — false to our history — not to try to sing a new song. Our forebears dared as much in their day. There was a time when plainsong was “contemporary,” a time when “Gothic” or “Colonial” was truly new. Resisting the new denies the power of the Holy Spirit. And it is part of my argument in these pages that we, in the Spirit, have a prophetic authority which dares to anticipate the times — “Behold, I make all things new.”



II. CULT AND CULTURE: “HIGH” OR “LOW?”

These paragraphs, then, represent one person’s attempt to read the contemporary culture and to try to identify what is **WORTHY** in it. Identifying the worst in a given situation is often easy enough. But the Apostle calls us to another responsibility: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (*Philippians 4:8*)

These words take us to the heart of the **INCARNATION**. When we worship, we are celebrating the Good News “in, with and under” a very human set of cultural forms and values. So let’s ask, “What’s good about these first years of the Twenty-First Century?” To answer that question is to suggest some of the “flesh” or “clothes” of the Gospel in our age.

When we compare our current culture, at its best, to past eras or aeons, our **OWN TIMES** can be described as both “high” and “low.”

Our times today are “**HIGH**,” first of all, in levels of education attained, in levels of personal or professional competence achieved — particularly in the mastery of various technologies. Our world is “high” in degrees of sophistication, “high” even in the sense of keyed-up, “turned on,” exhilarated, at the frontiers of perception and awareness. Cynics might maintain that our current culture is “high” equally in the sense of over-ripe, ready to decay!



Yes, we are living in a “high” culture, and it promises to get even higher. You could wish, on your most cheerful days, that **ALL OF LIFE** could have such “height”, for all the world’s peoples!.

The implication I’m drawing here is that our worship had better be correspondingly “high”. As I have already observed, even in the most remote communities we are surrounded by people who know the difference between what is worthy in our world and what is not. Are we to be “**HIGH CHURCH?**” Of course, simply because we are living in a “high culture.”

At the same time, our contemporary culture, at its best, is also “**LOW**”. I use the word here in the sense of basic, common, earthy, ordinary, authentic, without pretense or dissimulation, full of spontaneity and surprise, reaching deep into realities. Again, you could wish that all of life would have such depth, for all people.

And our worship? It had better be correspondingly authentic, correspondingly real. Are we “**LOW CHURCH?**” Of course. Because our world is.

III. WHAT'S NEW? SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY

Apart from the qualities of height and depth I've just noted, are there **OTHER** cultural characteristics that could be called “contemporary”?

When I first composed these paragraphs, now thirty years ago, the “**CONTEMPORARY**” spirit was clear and unambiguous and easy to identify. Modern art, modern architecture, modern music, modern literature — all of these, each of these, shared in a value-system that amounted to a compelling cultural consensus. There was a discernable commonality in outlook, a shared vision as to what constitutes a “modern” sensibility. There was no question, thirty years ago, as to what was “modern”. And what was not.

That cultural consensus of the last two-thirds of the Twentieth Century — alas — is now **SHATTERED**. There is, today, no common, compelling cultural consensus, as there was a generation ago. Today you'll find no common voice in the arts. There are no shared assumptions these days about what's good or true or beautiful. Today, it's anyone's call.



Instead, we're living in a period of passages, of transitions. (“We're living in an Age of Transition,” said Adam to Eve as they left the Garden...) Today you'll find a confusion of competing and contradictory

REPRISTINATIONS: Neo-Classical. Neo-Baroque. Neo-Romantic. Even Neo-Victorian. These last years of the Twentieth Century and first years of the Twenty-First have been given a hapless cultural designation: “Post-Modernist”. I suppose that's as good a label as any. But don't look there — in Post-Modernism — for any cultural consensus. There's no consensus on anything, today. Nobody now holds hegemony.

But the “Modern” sensibility did represent a stunning cultural **AGREEMENT** that bears recalling, and even cultivating. “Modernism” enthralled three generations of Twentieth Century thinkers, writers, doers, makers. It became the single distinguishing social and cultural voice of the Twentieth Century. And it still speaks today with persuasive power, to many. I find myself, in these Post-Modern times, still enamoured of the assumptions and values and presuppositions of Modernism.

So in the following sections, next time, I'll suggest five characteristics — You may find others — that I believe represent the best of the spirit of “**MODERNISM**”, which began in the early decades of the Twentieth Century, and which, I believe, continues with some power even into our day. No, the Modernist sensibility no longer dominates the conversation, culturally speaking, as it did only a generation ago. There are today a bewildering variety of competing and contradictory voices claiming attention and allegiance, each calling itself “contemporary.”



But if you bear any responsibility at all for **LEADING** the Church through these perilous times, you owe it to yourself and to your vocation to try to learn at least the broad outlines of the Last Great Cultural Consensus: Modernism.

