

Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [pbosch@golden.net](mailto:pbosch@golden.net) ]

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## WW '72: CHAPTER 4 (CONTINUED)

### WHAT'S NEW?

### WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY?

OK. Let's turn now to five characteristics of **MODERNISM** that define its power.

And even though we're presumably now living in a "**POST-MODERN**" age, I focus on Modernism for three reasons. First because Modernism is still with us, presenting a coherent consensus of values I can't find, yet, in our Post-Modern world. There's no unanimity, so far, in Post-Modernism. Second, I focus on Modernism because Modernism held the stage for more than half a century as the predominant persuasion in art, music, and literature. And third, because the term Modernist is such a mystery, for many, such a misunderstood and, yes, maligned social movement. So. Herewith, five aspects of the Mystery of Modernism made plain!

A. A REJECTION OF SENTIMENTALITY — Not romance but reality

The first characteristic of the Modernist spirit I'll cite is this: It rejected sentimentality. In the early part of the Twentieth Century, a reaction set in against the **EMOTIONAL EXCESSES** of the Victorian Age. For evidence of Victorian passions at their most purple, I submit the libretto and score of almost any Nineteenth Century grand opera. Modernism, in contrast, was suspicious or even contemptuous of such over-the-top sentiment. Emotion has always been there — the Modernist spirit has nothing against honest expression of emotion. But the purple passions of the Victorian era were rejected in favor of a more restrained appeal. At its best, the Modernist spirit is rigorously honest, as I have already argued, and impatient with any pretension, including emotional pretension.



The implication for our **WORSHIP**? Liturgical texts and music that are correspondingly restrained, correspondingly modest. If our worship is to be “contemporary,” according to the Modernist consensus, then we had better be on constant guard against sentimentality and bathos.

And curiously, there is a real **CONVERGENCE** here of the Modernist and the Biblical spirit. The moderated language of the Bible is often quite Modernist in spirit — not at all sentimental, but tremendously moving nevertheless. Read again the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in *Genesis 22* for a splendid example of a narrative which avoids every temptation to sentimentalize — and what opportunities are there for indulging in purple passions! It’s a real lesson for us today.

As another **EXAMPLE** — this time negative — the hymn *Beautiful Saviour or Fairest Lord Jesus* seems to me to cross over the line into bathos. It is not a Modernist hymn, I would argue. It is simply too sentimental and sweet. That should not prevent us from singing it. Or from loving it! I’m simply observing here that its bathos marks it as Victorian, not modern.



At the same time, to be quite fair, I’d be willing to admit there’s a lot of sentimentality and romantic bathos in some **MODERN** folk masses or pop hymns or praise choruses. Purple pretensions in emotion can be new as well as old. At its best, the Modernist spirit rejects both.

## B. THE REJECTION OF OVERSTATEMENT — “Less is more”

A second characteristic of the Modernist consensus is related to the first. Along with a rejection of romantic sentimentality, the Modernist spirit — the Pre-Post-Modern consensus, if you follow me — rejects overstatement in favor of brevity, **SIMPLICITY**, honesty and even understatement. It honours “primary experience.”

“**LESS IS MORE**” became the formula by which the Modernist consensus expressed its conviction that (within limits!) the less one says, the more one says. The story of Abraham and Isaac is again a case in point. So is the rose and the seashell. There is an austerity in the contemporary spirit that is not all cold and colourless but rather represents a return to fundamentals. The Modernist sensibility encourages us to concentrate on what is most authentic and most essential, and forget the rest. “Less is more.”

As a case in point, I cite the prose of Ernest Hemingway, made up almost entirely of simple nouns and verbs. “The adjective is the enemy of the noun,” says the old grammarian, and that spirit is definitely Modernist. That mood or method is both basic and Biblical — a preoccupation with what is most authentic, most **ESSENTIAL**.

In **ARCHITECTURE**, the Bauhaus movement has shown us how beautiful a building

can be at its most elemental: Natural materials and exposed engineering in lines and shapes and volumes that are basic, simple, un-embroidered, un-elaborated, and yet powerfully moving and effective. You put a single human being in such a simple setting, and it becomes a celebration! Even one dressed in rags! For a contrasting example, in a High Baroque Church, with its frescoes and mosaics and sculptures, its swirling angels and polychromes and gold leaf, you'd have to be Louis the Fourteenth in your royal robes even to be noticed! I'm not saying here — at least not yet — that Baroque is bad. I'm simply trying to illustrate the Modernist sensibility.

As an example from our SONG, I cite the hymn, *O God, our help in ages past*, as truly Modernist in spirit. Read its stanzas; All is nouns and verbs, with strong, elemental language that needs no embroidery. Yet it remains powerfully moving.

In preaching, in architecture, or in choice of hymns, I'd be willing to **ENDORSE** the watchword "Less is more."

### C. THE EVOLUTION OF ABSTRACTION: "The medium is the message"

A third characteristic of the "Pre-Post-Modern" spirit is the conviction that the arts, as media for human expression and communication, do not have to *represent* anything iconographically. The arts can be totally **ABSTRACT** and still express and communicate. In Aristotelian terms, both human expression and inter-human communication reside in form as well as in content. In McLuhanese, the medium is at least part of the message.

The Modernist spirit encourages you to discern the import expressed in the **MEDIUM** itself — colour, texture, patterns, rhythms, harmonies and so on — rather than trying to discover "iconographic significance" there. In a word: Don't look for Moonlight in that Sonata!

Don't look for moonlight there — but do look for **MEANING**. To take away subject matter from art — painting or poetry or dance or music — does not leave it meaningless. Abstraction (non-representation) in contemporary culture is an acknowledgment that

human beings can "speak" and understand each other non-cognitively as well as cognitively. This kind of expression will not communicate precise information very well. But we have photography, journalism and *koine* prose for that. Human communication, because it involves abstraction, will not simply record reality; It will comment upon it, interpret it, give testimony about it.



The significance of this for **WORSHIP** is only slowly becoming plain for Protestants. Non-cognitive, "right-brain" communication is simply part of human life, even if we're

ignorant of it. And it does communicate, even if we happen to be insensitive to *what* it communicates. As example I cite the Tradition's Church Year colour codes: Easter's white, Advent's blue, Lent's purple, Pentecost's red, the green of Ordinary Time. They speak, no question about it.

If we do not utilize the arts, in other words, to say what we *want* them to say, then you can be certain they will not be **SILENT**. They will say what we do *not* want them to say. Our contemporary congregations are full of people who *do* understand what the arts are saying. What a pity if their leaders do not!

Hence: At least some understanding and appreciation of the arts as media of **NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION** will be required of every worship leader, simply as part of your on-going hermeneutical homework.

D. A WILLINGNESS TO SHOCK: Out of apathy into insight

The fourth characteristic of the Modernist consensus is its willingness to shock the viewer or hearer out of complacency and apathy into new meaning or **INSIGHT**. That sensibility has shown itself willing to take a risk, to pay a price in order to communicate effectively. I can remember the words of an old teacher: "Art means distorting the truth in the interest of the truth."

As a result, there is a Modernist cultural predisposition to **SHOCK**, to be shocking.

Part of this disposition to shock can be explained once again as a reaction against Victorian excesses. And those excesses have persisted well into our own century. Our society is even now, as I write these words, in the grip of a high **INFLATION** in the languages by which people communicate. This cultural inflation continues long beyond the Victorian era.



Politicians have learned the seductive power of "**SPIN**". Madison Avenue-style advertising uses language indiscriminately and often dishonestly. (At *Starbucks* these days you can't get "small", "medium", or "large": It's "Tall", "*Grande*" and "*Venti*" — language inflation with Italian pretensions!) Programmed music assaults you in banks and buses and other public places. Television bombards you with visual images — most of them commercial in intent.

Understandably, we have learned to turn it all off. You **TUNE OUT**, or you become a cynic.

In such a world, it becomes increasingly **DIFFICULT** to get across a serious message. The cultural currency is grossly inflated. A word, a line, a sound, a shape no longer command authority or even attention, as they did when language was more modest. Our sensitivities are sated. And we no longer believe or even listen when others speak.

It is against this background of babble on the one hand and unbelief on the other that contemporary artists, for example, are trying to speak their message. So they take the risk to shock, to offend, not simply for the sake of shock or offense — although the temptation is always there to do just that — but most importantly, to get across a message and break through apathy into insight. They do not always succeed, but their efforts are often commendable. After all, they are defending, in contemporary terms, the **EIGHTH COMMANDMENT**, “You shall not bear false witness.”

The implication for our **WORSHIP**? Perhaps we had better be willing to pay a price to get across our message. We must have the courage to take the risk — perhaps the risk of offense — so that people will once again hear and understand, or at least pay attention. How to do this remains to be worked out. I can conceive of situations in which the Church, like the theater, feels compelled to use even nudity or obscenity to make its message clear. Desperate measures in desperate times!



So: In contrast to our understandable desire for “decency and order” in our worship, can it be that a certain amount of **UNTIDINESS** should be present in our worship? We will not always be able to gather all the strings into one neat bow. In new forms of proclamation especially, but also in worship leadership, the loose ends may have to dangle as part of the price for direct, compelling address.

I am certainly not advocating that worship each Sunday become an emotional obstacle course, with **ASSAULTS** and shocks and offenses at every turn. But there is a legitimate offense in the Gospel which we have a right to make clear. It has become too easy for people to tune out or turn off.

Who speaks for the Eighth Commandment? If our “**SECULAR**” artists are daring to bear a true witness, can the Church do less?

E. A REJECTION OF “GREEK” BEAUTY IN FAVOR OF “HEBREW” — “Form follows function”

The last characteristic of the Modernist spirit is the rejection of what I will call “Greek” concepts of beauty in favour of what I will call “**HEBREW**” concepts. If I understand it correctly, Greek concepts of the beautiful were based on earthly approximation to some heavenly ideal. Hebrew beauty, in contrast, was practical, operational.

For the Greek consciousness, that is, the beautiful chair is one that approximates most closely some other-worldly ideal of chair-ness. To the Hebrew sensibility, the beautiful chair is one that can be sat upon, that invites being sat upon. “Greek” beauty, in a word, is ideal; “Hebrew” beauty is **FUNCTIONAL**.

The formula which expresses this conviction in Modernist architecture is the aphorism “**FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION**.” Beauty is defined as organization for a purpose.

Something is beautiful, that is, if it works well, if it invites you to use it according to its purposes. There is a sense in which this Modernist conviction is also profoundly Biblical, and even “ethical.” As I understand the Hebrew scriptures, “righteousness” was a functional designation. “Beauty” and “righteousness” were almost synonymous: They both implied a correlation between form and function, purpose and performance. The Modernist spirit, at its best, affirms this correlation.

This suggests a good deal for our **WORSHIP**. It encourages you to ask two questions of the forms, symbols, actions or music we use: 1) What is its purpose? and 2) How well does it preform that purpose? If in liturgy “form follows function,” then we have a handy rule-of-thumb in evaluating much of what is old and what is new.



As I have indicated earlier, all of the above represents the Modernist sensibility **AT ITS BEST**. That sensibility has been eighty to ninety years in the making, and represented in its day a truly astonishing cultural consensus. Most significantly, there is almost nothing in our current Service Books which necessarily prevents our worship from exhibiting this spirit — not even a creative new prayer need be added. All depends on judicious selection from the Tradition — a selection which will retain those items from the Tradition that reflect this sensibility, and reject those items which do not express that spirit. To be “contemporary,” we don’t have to be creative — that is my point here. We need only be properly critical, appropriately selective.

But as I have suggested, we are living through a cultural **REVOLUTION** — *Post-Modernist* — in which that Modernist sensibility has lost its hegemony. Space does not permit identifying all the counter (and counter-counter!) movements that have arisen in recent years to challenge the sensibility just described.

And, to be sure, each of these challenges possesses its **OWN** measure of “whatever is true, whatever is honorable...” The elegant, graceful prose of John Updike is positively Baroque compared to the sinewy simplicity of Hemingway. But who’s to say it’s less beautiful? Or less moving? Those magnificent billowing shells of Australia’s Sydney Opera House hardly represent the maxim “Form follows function.” But aren’t they splendid? As the Apostle reminds us: “There is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon.” *1 Corinthians 15:41*.

In any case, it will take the sharpest **IMAGINATIONS** among us to seek out what is worthy, in the culture and convictions of every age, and press *that* into service as Bearer of the Word.

In the next chapter we’ll take a look at the **RAW MATERIALS** of worship, out of our Tradition and our times.

