

MASS CULTURE

The interface of Eucharist and mission

EDITED BY PETE WARD

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ESSENTIALLY STRANGE: COMMUNION AND CULTURE

Pete Ward

‘And the other thing I’m doing is a book about culture and the communion service. It’s called *Mass Culture*—get it?’ No, he didn’t get it. ‘So why are you bothering with that?’ my friend asked with a mixture of puzzlement and disdain.

This was one of my regular catch-up meetings with a youthwork friend of mine. We meet from time to time to share how our lives are going. This time we were in a pub just down the road from my office. I had been talking about the things I had on the boil at that present moment and I suppose I had saved my most exciting new project (this book) until the end. The problem was, my friend wasn’t impressed, he just couldn’t get his head round it. ‘So why are you bothering with that?’ I was outraged; could he not see how important the communion was for outreach in our culture? But then why should he? What evidence is there that the communion service makes a difference in practice to youthwork—or any other kind of Christian mission?

My friend had a point, and I had to admit that it was the accuracy of what he said that made me angry. This only partly explains my reaction, though. I was also deeply frustrated that somehow the Church had managed to take the central act of Christian worship—communion—and disconnect it from people like my friend. Surely communion, of all things, should feed mission and evangelism? If communion was not connecting with

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young people, surely something was badly wrong?

This was a brief flashpoint in a conversation, but I have recounted it here because I think it highlights why, at this time, a book about communion and how it relates to present-day culture is very much needed.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

A brief tour round a Christian bookshop is very revealing. There are plenty of books that deal with the worship of the Church, and many of these discuss at some length the practice and theology of communion. There are increasing numbers of books that explore the issues of the Gospels and ones that explore contemporary/post-modern culture. There are, however, very few books that bring these two areas of thought together. This is the idea behind *Mass Culture*. The aim is to start a discussion about the relationship between mission, contemporary culture and communion.

The contributors to this book have been chosen because they come from different theological and Church traditions, but they were also selected because they share a concern for mission in contemporary society. Their original brief was very basic: write about the relationship between communion, mission, and present-day culture. The result is this collection of original and creative reflections on the worship and mission of the Church. Despite the differences between the authors, their contributions demonstrate a convergence of opinion. The result is that a number of broad themes emerge throughout the book.

That the themes recur in the contributions is less than surprising: communion has generally been close to the heart of Christian identity and worship throughout church history. We may come from a variety of church traditions or hold different theologies dear, but somehow communion connects us with the Gospels in a way that goes beyond our differences. Added to this, while the commitment

to the practice of outreach and mission may vary for each of us, we are fairly close in our appreciation of the effect that contemporary culture has upon these activities. If I am honest, I invited a number of the authors to write contributions for this book because of the similarity of their views on these matters. Yet, what I have discovered as I have read these chapters, is that questions of mission and culture seem to be concentrated or magnified when they are considered in relation to the theology and practice of communion. Somehow, it seems that when we take mission, culture and communion seriously, a number of issues are brought sharply into focus and the creative sparks start to fly. I have summarized the discussion, as I see it, under the following three headings.

The captivity of church culture

Talk of communion leads to a realization that churches seem to have a culture that is all their own. The confusion over the name—Lord's supper, eucharist, mass, breaking of bread—is a good indication of how particular we are about how we practise communion and how we interpret our practice. (Incidentally, I have opted to use the word 'communion' in this book because it seems to me to be the most accessible term.)

Whatever our particular theology, I suspect that most Christians feel that communion is 'special'. We express this in a variety of different ways. Mike Riddell and Jonny Baker in their chapters recognize the special place that communion has for most church-goers, but they object to the way that this then leads to restricted access. Mike Riddell calls this the 'fencing of the table', that there is a tendency to keep away both unbelievers and those outside a particular denomination. The belief that communion is in some way special or important often seems to work against mission. The 'specialness' of communion, however, is also expressed by the variety of ways that churches 'do' communion.

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Communion at its most basic is a very simple act involving the recounting of an incident in the life of Christ and the eating of bread and drinking of wine. Christians have developed a number of complex traditions connected with this ritual. These involve the use of music, styles of clerical dress, ritual actions, the architecture and arrangement of places of worship, patterns of words or liturgy that are generally said and so on. These various traditions are an indication of the importance of communion for the life of the Church, both past and present.

However, the problem—as nearly every writer in this collection points out—is that these traditions, while they may be very highly regarded by church members and leaders, are, in general, unrelated to contemporary culture. Communion comes across as a remnant of some past age. It is old and venerable, we know it is important and for many of us it is spiritually powerful, but it is also frustrating. The church tradition around communion often seems to dislocate us from our contemporary culture. Thus we are faced with the irony (or maybe the blasphemy) that communion, which is meant to speak both of Christ's giving of himself for the world, and to demonstrate the inclusive nature of the Christian Church, often alienates unbelievers and sometimes fails to communicate gospel grace. Moreover, for committed Christians, it seems to locate encounter with the divine in a cultural environment that is alien to the one in which most of us live our lives.

These are serious issues, and they lead the writers in this book to express, in fairly strong terms, the absolute necessity of bringing about change in the way we do communion. Jonny Baker speaks of the need to 'reclaim' the rite, Stephen Cottrell of the need to 'reinvigorate' the eucharist and Sam Richards of the importance of 'communicating the story'.

There is a widespread and growing realization that the music, ritual, organization, texts and practices of our churches are out of touch with the mainstream of contemporary culture. This is far from new—most theologians and cultural commentators writing from a

Christian perspective would echo this kind of opinion. At the same time, it seems that the way we do communion seems extraordinarily resistant to change. Communion, perhaps more than any other act of worship, is held captive in a conservative church culture. The authors in this book agree that it is precisely this that needs to be changed if mission in contemporary culture is to succeed. They also recognize that the traditions and liturgies associated with communion have succeeded in keeping the Christian community connected to gospel truth.

What is needed therefore is a contextualization of communion within contemporary culture that remains connected to the residue of gospel truth seen in the tradition of the Church. This involves a balancing act, and it is much easier to be successful when writing a book about it than when working with a real congregation. Yet, despite its difficulties, it remains a basic goal of Christian mission and worship.

Communion is essential for mission

Communion recounts and makes present the gospel of Jesus Christ. Stephen Cottrell and Graham Cray, in particular, explore the theology of communion and describe how it encapsulates the Christian story in both word and action. They also make clear that it is precisely because communion is rooted in a gospel encounter with Christ that it is of such crucial importance for mission. Theologically, it is inconceivable that communion should bear no relation to mission. If it relates to mission, then it must connect, in some way, with contemporary culture. Of course, the current practice of the church may not be connected in this way, but it does not mean that this kind of dislocation is either desirable or necessary.

It is insights like these that lie behind the increasing number of experiments in worship among young people and other groups within the church. As Jonny Baker and Mike Riddell make clear, the

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primary motivation within what some call ‘alternative worship’ has *not* been to change worship so that it will attract outsiders into the Church. Rather, the idea has generally been for Christians, who, on a day-to-day basis, consume and appreciate contemporary culture, to try to make sense of Christian worship for themselves. They do this by using popular forms of music, video technology, ritual and community life. This is seen as being mission-based, because it is a genuine interaction with the cultural climate of our media-oriented world. At the same time, there is a realization that whatever kind of worship emerges will inevitably communicate more widely.

Communion has been a source of inspiration and experimentation for many within ‘alternative worship’. The mixture of symbol, story and ritual that make up the rite have been very fruitful for those seeking new ways to connect contemporary culture and worship. Communion, however, also brings the theological and spiritual weight of Church tradition into play in a unique way. There is a sense that, if worship can incorporate a sensitivity to a changing, diverse, postmodern culture and, at the same time, celebrate communion in a way that is recognizable to believers and non-believers alike, then something significant has been achieved.

At the other end of the spectrum from alternative worship are those charismatic groups that have also developed their own styles of worship. Dave Roberts explains that charismatic spirituality has embraced a worship style based on spontaneous expression and freedom in worship. However, he also shows how charismatic worship can have a tendency to become routine and somewhat stylized. He describes how, in recent years among many charismatic groups, there has been a growing appreciation for tradition and liturgy. A concern to integrate communion with these new patterns of charismatic worship has played a key role in bringing this about.

Charismatic worship, in its desire for relevance and immediacy in worship, has always been linked to mission. The aim has been to see churches as more lively and open places that welcome outsiders. Yet, even in this context, communion has been difficult to ignore.

The communion holds within it extraordinary resources for encounter with God, and it is this aspect that charismatics find impossible to ignore.

Communion and the gospel

Communion is a repository of Christian tradition and theological truth. The desire to reach out in ways that connect with those outside the Church is extremely important. At the same time, as we do so, there is always the danger that we may let go of aspects of the gospel in our desire to be relevant and in touch with those outside the Church. Culture is made *by* people *for* people. It will therefore have aspects of it that work, and are in tune, with Christian faith, and there will be aspects of it that limit the action of the gospel. Contemporary culture or postmodernity is no different in this respect.

Many within the Church experience contemporary culture as a fundamental challenge to the faith. The conservative, enclosed nature of the worship of the Church is a response to the challenge of postmodernity. It offers a retreat into a safe, homey environment that promises us, while outside everything may be unsteady and rapidly changing, at least in the Church we know where we are. The problem, as many of the contributors to this book point out, is that when we retreat we also seem to lose something of the heart of what the gospel is all about. This is brought into sharp focus by the communion service.

Retreat into a church culture disconnected from the world in which we live is extremely beguiling. Viewed from within, it is very hard to make a distinction between the gospel and the church's own particular cultural expression of the faith. When we abandon the attempt to contextualize the faith in contemporary life, we lose the ability to sift what is a gospel rejection of a particular aspect of culture from a defensive reactionary position that grows from our

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cultural dislocation. As a result, many of the Church's responses to postmodernity are simply a defence of Church culture.

If communion is to be reframed within contemporary culture, it must be done in a way that is true to the gospel—that is, a way that does not do damage to the nature of communion itself. Graham Cray makes this point with some force. His argument, in brief, is that much of what has been put forward as 'postmodernism' is incompatible with Christian commitment. A postmodernist communion is a contradiction in terms. Postmodernism speaks of the end of all meaning, grand narrative and truth. Communion, on the other hand, points to a God who is 'beneath the surface', the author of the Gospel story and the source of all truth. At the same time, while we may not necessarily advocate postmodernism, we all live in a world that is experiencing postmodernity. How can we celebrate a communion that is rooted in the gospel without selling out to postmodernism? This is precisely the dilemma *Mass Culture* is trying to grapple with, and the chapters that follow offer insights and examples of some ways forward.

YOUTH CULTURE: IN IT BUT NOT OF IT

Many of the recent innovations in worship have been influenced by youth culture. This is very much the case for the charismatic styles of praise and celebration. In both of these contexts Christians have wrestled with the theology and practice of communion. They have done so, however, out of a worship that has been contextualized within an aspect of contemporary popular culture. Since the 1960s Christian young people have tried to develop styles of worship using the music that has been popular at the time. The widespread adoption of new musical forms for worship has brought with it a significant sea change in the culture of many of our churches.

Change has come about because large sections of the Christian community have been anxious to be 'relevant' to young people.

Reaching out to a younger generation has usually been accompanied by the adoption of a youth 'style'. With the clothes and the music has come a way of being Christian that has been reshaped by this 'contextualization' within popular culture. As the gospel has come alive for young people it has found a means of expression within popular culture. The contemporary Christian scene has therefore been forged from a creative interaction between the gospel and the forms and conventions associated with popular culture. The result has been that a growing number of festivals, record companies and media offer the contemporary Christian a fusion religious culture (or cultures). Worship has been central to these developments.

The reshaping of religious life in the form of popular culture has not been imposed on a reluctant public. Far from it. The consumption of a religious culture depends on the active and enthusiastic participation of consumers. We buy the CDs, go to the festivals and bring home the T-shirts. This is not just a commercial activity, it is linked to our sense of religious belonging. Young Christians use the products of a Christian popular culture as sources of identity and meaning. Who we are as Christians has become linked to the kind of worship songs we sing and what festivals we go to.

The contextualization of the gospel within popular culture is, in my view, a cause for celebration. Without the energetic and creative activity associated with the production and consumption of religious media, the Church would be a much sadder and, I fear, deader place. However, as a result, we appear to have hitched our cart to the whirlwind world of popular culture and this has brought with it significant problems.

Popular culture is not a static entity—it is continuously and rapidly changing and extremely varied. The way that young people construct their social identities in relation to contemporary media has undergone significant changes in the last fifteen or so years. The nature of the media has reacted to this shift by developing more

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diverse and varied incarnations. With Christian life so closely associated with the mores of popular culture, these changes are starting to have a profound effect on young Christians as they consume religious products allied to this culture.

In my view, this is where the practice and theology of communion can be brought into play. Where so much is on the move, maybe communion can represent a point of orientation and stability for a contextualized Christian popular culture. The Christian youth worship scene has been concerned to be 'relevant' and accessible in contemporary culture, but, as the authors in this book point out, relevance must not be pursued at the expense of faithfulness to the gospel. The gospel speaks of a God who is above and beyond our human expressions and limitations. This means that our worship should be both an expression of faith within culture and an attempt to point beyond culture. God, of course, meets us where we are, in the words, music, bread and wine. All of these are made by human hands and are therefore 'cultural'. At the same time, an encounter with the living God within culture reminds us of our mortality and limitations. The word I want to use for this is decontextualization.

Decontextualization is what happens when a young person from the inner city climbs a mountain in Wales for the very first time. Decontextualization is what happens when a charismatic evangelical Christian visits a Catholic shrine such as Lourdes and they feel the familiar touch of the Spirit. Decontextualization, therefore, is an experience that jolts us out of our current way of seeing and doing things. Suddenly we look at life in a different way. It is my view that communion carries within it an ever-present possibility for decontextualization. Communion is strange, wild and holy. This does not arise from what we do, it comes from God.

A NATURAL MOVE: CONTEXTUALIZATION IN YOUTH CULTURE

A glimpse of God, who transcends culture, is urgently needed at this time. The reason for this is that we have been very successful in expressing the faith within youth culture—so much so that it seems natural to many of us that our worship should reflect the contemporary styles of music. Today, the existence of vibrant and creative Christian popular culture can seem quite natural—it's part of the way things are. In the early 1960s, however, very little of what we recognize as youth-oriented Christianity existed. The story of how the Christian music scene came about and then how it was able to colonize the wider Church is beyond the scope of this present chapter. There are, however, four main points that can be highlighted to demonstrate the natural move towards popular culture.

Music attracts

Evangelism was the motivating force in the developing relationship between evangelicalism and popular culture. Christians believed that pop music would attract young people and bring them to faith. It is interesting to observe that, from this essentially theological concept, an economic and social reality was born. This was inevitable. Youth culture exists in the relationship between the production of records, clothes, films and so on and their creative consumption by groups of young people. Identity and consuming are integrally linked.

Youth culture is lifestyle

Towards the end of the 1960s in San Francisco and other parts of the United States young people who had been involved in the

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counterculture began to turn to the Christian faith. The result was a combination of relatively conservative faith with the subcultural style of the hippies: the Jesus Movement was born. What was an indigenous youth movement in the US was imported to the UK as a consumer package and the appropriation of popular culture became not simply a strategy for evangelism, it also offered the possibility of a new, and of course 'hip', way of being Christian.

For many Christian leaders, the new Jesus Revolution was a wonderful work of God. Writing in 1971, Michael Green heralded the faith of these young Christians:

*I encountered the Jesus People in Australia this summer and rejoiced in their vitality and zeal. There are various groupings of young Christians in their teens and twenties (of whom the Jesus People are one) who have dedicated themselves to a wholehearted, world-renouncing Christianity, and live in communes marked by deep mutual fellowship and love, together with a burning evangelistic zeal.*¹

Green saw much to admire in the commitment of these young people and the way that they found new ways to express the faith and evangelism. Green was critical of the adult Church, characterizing their faith as 'domesticated' and comfortable. In contrast, he welcomed the commitment of these new young Christians.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Billy Graham in his book *The Jesus Generation*:

*I have become convinced that the 'Jesus Revolution' is making a profound impact on the youth of America and shows signs of spreading to other countries. One thing is certain: Jesus Christ can no longer be ignored!*²

Many were able to look beyond the hippie style and music of the Jesus Movement and see the possibilities for a radical new kind of discipleship. Christian leaders such as Michael Green, Billy Graham and many others saw in the commitment of these young people a

fulfilment of their own hopes for the Christian Church. Here were young people who were full of joy in their worship, enthusiastic in evangelism and willing to sacrifice a great deal to be a part of 'God's great plan'. While conservative religious leaders may have appeared a million miles away from hippie music or their dress sense, they were willing to tolerate these for the sake of the gospel. The contextualization of the gospel in youth culture was born out of this bargain.

The charismatic movement

The style of the Jesus Movement and charismatic worship became closely interconnected in Great Britain. One of the ways in which this changed the indigenous Christian scene was that the use of rock and folk music as an evangelistic tool was slowly eclipsed by the growth in praise and worship music. The trend was started by Jimmy and Carol Owens' musical *Come Together*. The album, which was promoted by a tour featuring singer Pat Boone and charismatic leader Jean Darnell, sold more copies than any other Christian recording during the decade.

Worship music was suddenly centre stage and several artists were able to (re)launch careers in this specific area, most notably Graham Kendrick. In Kendrick we see the potent effects of merging popular music and charismatic spirituality. His impact on the worship scene can only really be understood in relation to the increasing popularity of festivals, celebrations, worship music available from record companies, religious publishing and so on. The mushrooming of such activities indicates a healthy market where producers of religious culture find that they are able to sell to a public eager to buy. Thus, the current worship scene is integrally linked to the enthusiasm of Christians for the consumption of a gospel contextualized in the cultural forms of popular culture.

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Young people grow up

What started as a youth thing very soon colonized the majority of mainstream churches. There is a very simple reason for this — young people grow up. Within fifteen years or so the young people who were first part of the Jesus Movement were themselves the leaders of churches and Christian organizations. As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, it was clear that the entrepreneurial activities of a few key players had transformed the Christian world in this country. As Richard Branson and Anita Roddick are to the high street, Graham Kendrick, Gerald Coates and Clive Calver are to the Christian counterculture scene. The simple process of ageing meant that the Christian youth culture was brought into the heart of the Church—it was a natural development.

THE PROBLEM WITH YOUTH CULTURE

The contextualization of the gospel in the youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s was a natural development for the Christian Church. The pay-off was fairly clear. Young Christians got a hip new style and the Church saw enthusiastic, committed disciples. This basic deal was at the heart of Christian work among young people then and has continued to the present day.

The effect of this arrangement has been the creation of an increasingly attractive and creative Christian cultural scene. Through record companies, publishers, marketing, festivals and so on, Christian young people have been offered, and have created for themselves, an ever more sophisticated subcultural world. This 'scene' has tended to present itself, and be used by young people themselves, as an alternative to mainstream youth culture. As this has happened, so the sense of belonging and identity that is usually associated with youth culture was merged with particular understandings of Christian lifestyle and discipleship. These

developments have been so successful that the newly constructed Christian scene has been able to represent itself as an all-embracing religious world where Christians can find a sense of identity, meaning and belonging. A consequence of these developments has been that, over the last thirty years, Christian commitment has become associated with participation in this scene. To be an enthusiastic young Christian, it has been necessary to be familiar with particular festivals, worship music and so on.

Alongside the promotion of Christian subculture, there was disapproval of the wider secular scene. This was such that, within some Christian circles, it was common for the consumption of 'secular music' to be discouraged or even denounced. Youth culture during the 1970s was constructed around well-defined, tight-knit groups. These groups held in common strictly defined dress codes and tastes in music. Christian belonging was also tightly defined by patterns of activity and music. In this way, the scene worked in roughly the same manner as any other youth culture at that time. There was a logical fit between the sense of identity and belonging associated with most youth cultures and the evangelical commitment of many of those involved in the Christian subculture. A conservative gospel could therefore become articulated with this aspect of youth culture in such a way as to ensure commitment and Church membership. Tight boundaries and a strong sense of belonging meant that those involved in the Christian youth scene could fulfil their theological ambitions.

The way that this was played out in the lives of young Christians can be illustrated in the development of Greenbelt. One of the main concerns of those involved in Greenbelt has been the exploration of the relationship between Christianity and the arts. In effect, what this has meant is that the festival has been at one and the same time a showcase for Christian artists and an arena for debate about the wider secular scene. Discussion, and the artistic policy of the festival's organizers, has revolved around notions of two different artistic worlds. This division or sense of a boundary (even if it was

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kicked against or argued away) grew from an evangelical inclination towards a separatist theology, but it was given life by the exclusivity inherent in the social dynamics of the youth culture of the 1970s and early 1980s. The one is contextualized in the other.

Greenbelt's cultural sensibilities emerged from the tensions and contradictions experienced by young Christians who were socialized into the Christian cultural scene. For many, the worship and artistic activity that originated from the alliance between youth culture and evangelical Christianity was a lifeline and something to be celebrated. At the same time the Christian scene created problems in its exclusivity. From the very beginning there were those who were more interested in getting into the secular music scene and those who were opposed to such ventures. Some were critical of what they saw as substandard Christian music and favoured a more open attitude to artistic life outside the strictly defined Christian field. This debate has been with us for almost 30 years now, but there are signs that it is losing its momentum and, in part, this is because of changes in the way that young people consume cultural products.

Today it is clear that youth culture has become a much more varied environment. Contemporary youth culture or, more properly, cultures, are characterized by increasing diversity and fragmentation. The effect of this has been to break down the strong collective identities that had existed among many young people. Where once there were mods and rockers or skinheads and hairies, there are now so many different groups and subgroups that it is almost impossible to make any generalization about styles of dress, musical tastes, behaviour, values and so on. In fact, the only generalization that can be made is that no generalizations are possible!

One aspect of this is that young people's tastes in music have become very hard to predict. The prevailing wisdom is that young people's identity is rarely to be found in a close identification with particular styles of music or individual groups. The response of record companies to the changing youth scene has been to offer a

diversity of different bands and artists packaged in a seemingly endless variety. The youth market is fragmented, fast-changing and very fickle. At the same time, the popular music scene has been characterized by a much more rapid turnover of songs and acts. One example of this is that, while more singles than ever are being sold, a large number of records leap very rapidly into the charts and then sink without trace in a matter of a week or two. The change in the music business reflects, and is influenced by, changes in the way that young people construct their identities. In place of easily identified youth groupings, young people now seem to be much more chameleon-like in the way that they consume styles of dress, behaviour and music. Identity is therefore created from a number of different and diverse sources. Personal style and taste is put together from a variety of contrasting media influences. Consequently, allegiance to any one artist, style of dress or social environment is much looser than was previously the case.

The effect of these changes on the Christian youth scene has been quite profound. Young people appear to consume the Christian scene in roughly the same way that they consume other scenes. That is, they move from one to the other fairly easily and construct their identities from whatever takes their fancy. The exclusivity that characterized both youth culture and the Christian youth culture in the last few decades has largely collapsed. The effect of this has been that many Christian young people have ceased to experience the tensions that characterized the sensibilities and debates of the previous (Greenbelt) generation. The competing demands of Christian and secular scenes have lost their power because the cultural logic of contemporary culture is that no scene is exclusive.

This basic shift in popular culture impacts the contextualization of the gospel in popular culture in three key ways.

- Young people are less likely to be embarrassed by the poor quality of music or recording or performance in the Christian scene.

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Instead, they treat it as part of the show. Christian dance music, worship music and so on are taken for what they are and, on the whole, they love it.

- The enthusiasm of many young people for the contemporary Christian scene is deceptive to those familiar with the earlier dynamic within youth culture. Those Christian leaders who are comfortable with the exclusive Christian culture interpret this enthusiasm as success, but those who are inclined to be critical of a separatist mentality are highly critical of festivals such as Soul Survivor.
- Ironically, both groups are probably mistaken. It is more likely to be the case that young people attracted to the Christian scene are simultaneously consuming a variety of other scenes.

This change in the way that young people consume Christian youth culture has far-reaching implications for the construction of identity, belief systems and belonging. The assumption on which most Christian youth leaders continue to operate is that involvement in Christian youth culture will have a profound and lasting effect on young people's lives. The exclusive claims of the Christian popular culture are built on the natural contextualization of Christian discipleship with a high level of participation in the scene. This connection was very successful —once.

The problem is that, in the current environment, such activity in the Christian scene does not necessarily ensure identification with a Christian lifestyle or a system of belief. Enthusiasm for worship or Christian music or attendance at festivals does not necessarily bring with it significant investment of identity and belonging in the way it seems to have done in the 1960s or 1970s. Christian young people are much more likely to follow their peers, dipping into various scenes, and, as a result, they are more culturally nomadic than in the past.

DISCIPLESHIP FOR NOMADS

The changes in the way that young people consume youth scenes are both a challenge and an opportunity for the contextualization of the gospel in popular culture. It is a challenge because the articulation of Christian lifestyle and the consumption of a Christian subculture have been disconnected. This means that while young people may assimilate much of the Christian message as a result of their involvement in Christian popular culture, at the same time their identity is not totally invested in such consumption. For those of us who are concerned to see young people develop coherent and lifelong Christian commitment, this is a problem. Where at one time a high level of involvement and enthusiasm for the Christian youth scene would have been an assurance of success, this is no longer the case. Young people migrate much more easily from one social arena to another and it is a matter of concern that Christian commitment may not travel with them in the same way that it did previously. In short, while they are at a youth festival, celebration or youth congregation they take on the Christian lifestyle. This lifestyle may not have the same draw on their lives when they are outside the Christian circle. Of course, this has always been the case, but previously there was a sense of loyalty or commitment to the Christian scene and, through that, to the Christian gospel. In the present dynamic of youth identity formation, however, such commitment is likely to be much less clear and, consequently, less enduring.

The nomadic tendency of contemporary young people is, ironically, an opportunity for the Christian Church. For previous generations, the Christian scene was effectively a social and cultural barrier that acted to set them apart from their peers and the wider youth culture. This worked against real outreach and witness. While those involved in the scene tried to make it more attractive and engaging, many young people drawn into its world found that they

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were disabled in their evangelistic efforts because of their sense of cultural schizophrenia. Young people currently involved in the Christian scene are much less self-conscious about any division. They are comfortable with both a vibrant Christian culture and the wider youth culture. This means that they are much more able to reach out to non-Christian friends than were young people in the past because they inhabit similar cultural worlds. The problem is the extent to which they are able to transport their faith, which is very much alive in the Christian cultural scene, with them as they journey. The successful contextualization of the gospel in youth culture means that many young people have experienced an invigorating encounter with the gospel. The problem is that this faith is in danger of being associated only with the active consumption of that culture. Contextualized expressions of the faith are problematical when they become ‘absolute’—that is, where the cultural expression of the faith becomes too closely linked with faith itself.

THE EUCHARIST AS ESSENTIAL DECONTEXTUALIZATION

The Christian gospel must be expressed within culture—otherwise it doesn’t come alive. At the same time, the reality of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ are always transcendent of any cultural expression of the faith, however powerful or relevant or inspired that expression may appear to be. The contextualization of the faith within popular culture is also subject to this basic theological reality. The answer to both the challenge and opportunities associated with the present dynamic lies in a renewed appreciation of the nature of God and of the gospel. It is my belief that we can find this appreciation in the communion service.

The development of the Christian youth scene has been driven by the desire to express the faith in terms of the culture of young people. This has been a necessary endeavour and its benefits are evident in the numbers of young people attracted to festivals such as Soul

Survivor and Greenbelt and in the way in which many have embraced the Christian life as their own. The contextualizing imperative is deeply felt, but it is my contention that the way that young people consume such culture now demands a parallel and complementary approach: contextualization needs to be complemented by decontextualization.

Decontextualization is the attempt to grasp a vision of the God who transcends culture and of a Christ who can be incarnate in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. Alongside the vivid expression of the gospel within contemporary youth culture there is a need to offer the Christian gospel as an overarching story. Within the Christian youth scene there needs to be a concern to find ways to present Christ as Lord of all life. Following Christ is a coherent act of everyday living, not just an aspect of participation in one scene among many others. For previous generations of young people, this theological truth was expressed in the exclusive claims of the Christian youth culture. Being Christian was about close identification with the scene. As we have seen, this social dynamic is rapidly collapsing as young people participate in a number of scenes. The need is for the gospel to be presented in a way that is portable, a faith that endures both within and outside of the youth scene. This faith is most powerfully presented in the bread and the wine of communion.

Experimentation with eucharist worship has characterized much of the alternative worship scene. These kinds of services have used all kinds of different music and visuals in an attempt to express the Christian gospel within new cultural forms. My observation, however, is that even in the most successful of services, the ritualistic act of eating bread and drinking wine seems to jar. We might be grooving to the most hip drum and bass track or quietly passing round the elements in an informal circle or gazing at an array of incredible images that form the backdrop to the service, but still the act seems strange. The strangeness is itself cultural, but can be used to our advantage.

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Communion holds within it the central narrative of the Christian faith: ‘This is my body’, ‘This is my blood’, ‘Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.’ The bread and wine and the simple words that go with them offer an insight into the transcendent nature of God and the overarching story that shapes us as believers.

Communion has been the central act of Christian worship for precisely this reason. It connects us with Christ, but it also affirms our solidarity with all Christians, past and present and future. In other words, despite our attempts to contextualize our worship in culture, communion points us beyond our present context. It relativizes our best efforts to be relevant. On one level this is of course cultural, as is all human activity. Communion, however, witnesses to the gospel of Christ in a way that is not limited by our creativity, rituals or even our theology. Communion pulls us up short; it transports us into another realm—the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

The Christian youth scene is extremely important to the future of the Church. It is vital that every effort be made to continue to connect with young people within their own cultural worlds. At the same time, there needs to be a recognition that this in itself is no longer enough. Those involved with young people need to know that they construct their social worlds in significantly different ways to those of us from previous generations. This means that there is a crucial need for attention to be paid, within the youth scene, to decontextualizing moments. These moments will, in effect, speak of a God who is bigger than our scene. The most important resource for this is communion.