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Thomas Spence on the Seeker movement in *Regeneration Quarterly*

A Rock 'N' Roll Worship Service

From the street, University Baptist Church looks ordinary enough. The squat brick building with its white steeple, near Baylor University in Waco, Texas, is indistinguishable from the small Baptist churches on every corner in this town. But the rhythmic thud of a bass guitar that greets you several feet outside the door suggests that in fact there might be something different going on here. Inside, you find the familiar atmosphere of a fraternity house: lots of worn but still functional sofas from the '70s, some folding metal chairs, and, on the dais, not a pulpit and communion table, but a drum set and amplification equipment. Peering through the musty dimness (the blinds are drawn over the plain glass windows), you almost expect to see a keg set up in the back. The only conventional church accoutrements in sight are some old pews along the side walls.

It is no mere coincidence that UBC bears little physical resemblance to the churches of mainstream American Christianity. Its mission is to reach the "seekers" of Generation X, and its pastor, the Reverend Chris Seay (pronounced "see"), has arranged everything to appeal to them. And how *do* you appeal to an unchurched generation whose hearts and minds have been formed by pop-culture icons like MTV and David Letterman? With music that sounds like MTV, preachers that talk like David Letterman, and churches that look and feel like the dorm rooms and fraternity houses where Generation Xers plug into this stuff. That, anyway, is Mr. Seay's answer. He calls it "embracing the idea of church in a whole new way." His cutting-edge services are popular among students and are attracting the attention of other pastors, but they invite the question whether idioms borrowed from the entertainment industry are appropriate for sacred worship.

The "seeker" movement in evangelicalism is often criticized for pandering to a spoiled and narcissistic generation that shrinks from the inconvenient and the demanding, not to say from the Cross. However justified such criticism may be in general, it is plain after a few minutes of conversation with Mr. Seay that it cannot fairly be applied to him. This is a man deeply in love with Jesus Christ and not afraid to confront realities like sin and the Gospel's call to self-giving. He is also an astute observer of his own generation, which has simply tuned out the traditional voice of Christianity: "I'm not sure that revival can come through the Christian culture that we understand today," Mr. Seay says. If a church would reach this new generation, it must "decode" the popular culture, much as a missionary in a strange land would do, in order to communicate the Gospel in an appealing and intelligible form. In his analysis of popular culture, Mr. Seay has discovered two keys to reaching Generation X. The first is MTV, the "one singular force" that has shaped the minds of Generation X (an insight as alarming as it is true). The second is David Letterman, who is thought to convey an air of authenticity by the apparent spontaneity of his television show.

The imprint of MTV and Letterman is evident in every part of the Sunday service at University Baptist. A five-man band, with vocals by the pastor, performs throughout the hour (and I do mean *hour*--this was the most promptly-concluding Baptist service you will ever see). It's the droning, plaintive sort of music known as "grunge" with Christian lyrics. The congregation is encouraged to join in with the aid of an overhead projector, but since rock music rarely lends itself to congregational singing, something less than a "joyful noise" rises from the worshipers.

The service opens with a studied imitation of the Letterman show, featuring an extempore dialogue between Mr. Seay and his associate pastor (a member of the band), easing into a very funny monologue by the latter. For five or ten minutes he describes a car trip with his wife to Texarkana, talking about the food they ate and the music they listened to, but with no apparent religious significance to the story. In the end, though, he ties it up neatly with a spiritual lesson and, after some more music, we move on to the Scripture reading and sermon.

Apart from a discussion of an article in *Rolling Stone* as a modern example of the ennui bemoaned in Ecclesiastes, the substance of Mr. Seay's sermon is really quite conventional. But coming from a

goateed young man in blue jeans slouched on a stool and speaking in collegiate slang, it seems different. Indeed, the same could be said of the whole service. In substance, it is not fundamentally different from any other Baptist service, but the externals are different. A final song and a prayer and the service ends. The students depart to immerse themselves anew in the culture they have never really left.

It goes without saying that the apostolic work of University Baptist and its pastor is not confined to the Sunday morning worship service. Mr. Seay and his staff pursue their calling through an array of ministrations and good works throughout the week, and their understanding of the Christian life can hardly be called superficial. Nevertheless, in their attempt to make church appealing to young people, they invite the criticism that they confuse worship with entertainment. Indeed, their acknowledged models are television shows. To be fair, "seeker-sensitive" churches like UBC are not the only ones tempted by ecclesiastical consumerism. Consider, for example, the following advertisement for one of Waco's oldest and biggest Baptist churches: "Choose First: For dynamic worship . . . For innovative Bible study . . . For caring relationships. First Baptist Church: the Church of Choices."

The response to the worship-as-entertainment criticism must be that human worship cannot ignore human tastes and sensibilities and has in fact always taken them into account. The object of our worship is a pure spirit, but we the worshipers are incarnated spirits. Worship is supposed to elicit a response to God by man, and it is disingenuous to say that using words and music that appeal to man's senses reduces the experience to mere entertainment. Granting this, though, some important objections remain. For one thing, a service based on rock-and-roll music cannot but be rigidly segregated by age. Just as shopping malls have begun piping in classical music to chase off unwelcome hordes of teenagers, so UBC in effect posts a sign on its door, "No grown-ups allowed." With no older people (and no children for that matter), there is no sense of the community within which a tradition is passed from generation to generation, but only that most characteristic obsession of our culture, the glorification of youth. Moreover, the aim of drawing an alienated and disaffected generation into the church remains unmet, since they have been drawn into contact only with others just like themselves. Second, there is no more certain way to become dated than to try to be up to date. Mr. Seay himself points out that the Maranatha music heard in countless "contemporary" worship services is embarrassingly passé, but Christian grunge is tomorrow's Maranatha.

Even if the previous objections are answered satisfactorily, there still seems to be something not quite right with worship that borrows so heavily from pop culture. A well-tuned soul naturally recoils from the wholesale invasion of the sacred by the profane. On a practical level, there is the risk that if worship is indistinguishable from the blur of daily life, it will be not more relevant but less. How "relevant" to your life is an episode of David Letterman, and how "relevant" is your wedding? The relevance of an event has little to do with its resemblance to the quotidian.

It is no accident that the rise of rock and roll coincided with the sexual revolution, the degradation of manners, and a general descent into moral anarchy. It is at best a trivial and at worst an ignoble musical form. The most important objection to a rock-and-roll worship service, then, is the theoretical problem of the form being unsuited to the material. When you combine a noble form with ignoble material, the incongruity can be funny, as when the King's Singers set the fire regulations of King's College chapel to Anglican chant. But the incongruity of noble material conveyed by an ignoble form is not funny but degrading. Thus my recent disgust at seeing a phrase from the Declaration of Independence, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," used on a billboard for a strip joint. One of the distressing signs of our times is that we are increasingly insensitive to this latter kind of incongruity, and when we do notice it, we accept it with a shrug as the price of making accessible what was formerly inaccessible and perhaps even rebuke ourselves for our residual snobbery.

In the end, Mr. Seay attributes both too much and too little importance to the forms of worship. Too much in that he thinks young people cannot be lured into church unless it looks and sounds like the popular culture in which they live and move and have their being. Too little in that he thinks any forms will do as long as they are attractive to the people he wishes to reach. But the vocation of following Christ is demanding, and a disciple of Jesus will have to overcome most of the appetites and habits that the people who shape our popular culture work tirelessly to cultivate. Designing a church service to resemble MTV and Letterman, therefore, is like holding an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in a bar. Someone has got to be fooling himself.

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