

Canonical Hours (see “Office”)

Chaos

In the first chapter of the first book of the Bible we run into chaos. God has created, but the earth is formless and there is no life on it. But then the Spirit of God hovers over the water, and things begin to change. Order emerges from chaos under the active movement of the Spirit. Since that time the church has majored on order. “Let everything be done decently and in order”¹ might have been the watchword for ministry in the last generation. Run through a technological grid, we took this to the furthest point with church growth strategies. Prediction and control were the outcome of a scientific age and rationalism. We assumed that we had all the information we needed, and we assumed that the information we needed was nearly all quantifiable. Let’s get on with the work, therefore, and build the kingdom. We probably should have been listening a little more to the book of Job (especially chapter thirty-eight and up).

Chaos theory was born in 1961 when meteorologist Edward Lorenz stumbled across a system that had sensitive dependence on initial conditions, making it impossible to predict outcomes. He discovered that even infinitesimally small variables can impact final results (the classic butterfly effect.) The outcome of all this was that the universe suddenly became much more mysterious, and we began to recognize our own hubris. A hermeneutic of finitude suddenly came back into play and large parts of the church began to rediscover mystery. Bruce Cockburn sings, “Can’t tell me there is no mystery, it’s everywhere I turn.”²

In practical terms this means that much of the church is less fixated on outcomes than once it was, and less convinced that the things we can measure are really worth measuring. We are moving from fixation on the ABCs (attendance, buildings and cash) to more relational measures. Some, like Reg McNeal, have made a point of arguing that the scorecard has to change.³ McNeal suggests that instead of asking: “How are our people doing,” we ask: “How is the community around us doing”⁴ It’s the kind of change that smacks of the Spirit of God hovering over the water, just waiting to bring order from chaos.

If we surf the edge of chaos for long enough, we will discover complexity. Complexity theory is not displacing systems theory, so much as moving it to a new level. Complexity considers the behavior of complex adaptive systems, like swarms of ants and a group adapting to radically new conditions. As a science, it represents three major steps beyond systems thinking:⁵

1. While systems thinking can address nonlinear events, it is rarely used to do so. In contrast, complexity science concerns itself with nonlinear effects where very small perturbations at the start lead to drastically different outcomes.
2. Complexity science is not build on the assumption that one can proactively control outcomes. Rather it emphasizes nimble reactions.
3. The living systems view conceptualizes the challenge of moving from point A to point B based on causal factors. Complexity concerns itself with the way the

¹ 1 Cor. 14:40.

² Bruce Cockburn, “Mystery.”

³ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*.

⁴ McNeal, *The Present Future*.

⁵ Pascale et al., *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*.

landscape itself changes as the organism moves across it: the journey is compared to walking on a trampoline. Each step alters the landscape.⁶

Complexity (see “Chaos”)

Communitas

Turner’s concept denoted intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging, often in connection with rituals. In *communitas*, people stand together outside society, and society is strengthened by this otherness. The concept is in many ways the opposite of Marx’s alienation and is closely related to Durkheim’s ideas about the sacred (versus the profane). *Communitas* as a social form alternates with ‘normal’ social structure, and is, according to Turner’s theories, not limited to the liminal phase in rites of passage. Many social phenomena are difficult to place within the rites of passage model of separation, liminality, and reintegration, but are more naturally considered a form of ‘anti-structure,’ alternating with normal social structure [as a dialectic].⁷

One way of understanding this dynamic is to view community on a sliding scale. What we typically describe as community is a convenient and voluntary association of sovereign individuals. Any meaningful bond is fragile and not very deep. However, when a human society or group comes under significant stress, it moves into liminality, and in that place the possibility of a new order exists: a *communitas*. For example, when the culture shifts and traditional roles are disembedded, we are thrown into liminality: anxiety and chaos ensue. People or societies in a liminal phase are a kind of institutional capsule or pocket, which contains the genes of the future. Throw away the sliding scale; this is closer to a cyclical process.

This may be ringing some bells, because it connects nicely to the work of stage theorists like Erikson, Fowler, and some of the work of Scott Peck. Peck⁸ had a particular interest in community, and he described four stages in forming community: pseudo-community, chaos, emptiness, and community. Most groups, in Peck’s view, hit the third stage and cycle back to the first, never achieving real community. But the promise of true community is enough to lead some groups further along the path. Moreover, in terms of transitional dynamics, *communitas* is the only way forward. When the landscape has changed drastically, simple adjustments are no longer possible. When we face escalating complexity, we don’t have the option of engineering a new future. There are too many variables, and they operate and interact at a level that is beyond our ability to predict. In these places we need a radically new paradigm. If we enter a liminal place together, something new may be generated. Alan Roxburgh writes that,

Communitas is a new kind of commons, an open space where we might discover and learn from one another in powerfully innovative ways... The commons is an archaic, unfamiliar idea . . . [it] refers to those spaces (land, ideas, values, relationships) open to ordinary people. They are collectively owned.⁹

This new commons is a place of both opportunity and danger. By definition it entails risk. It is Abraham hearing a call to a land he has not seen; it is Elijah in the cave; it is Joseph in captivity in Egypt. Alan Hirsch notes that liminality and *communitas* are strong elements in most

⁶ Ibid., 105–106.

⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

⁸ Peck, *The Different Drum*.

⁹ Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling*, 109.

adventure films.¹⁰ Moreover, he recalls David Bosch: “strictly speaking one ought to say that the Church is always in a state of crisis [but] only occasionally aware of it.”¹¹

The potential is for something new to emerge: “Communitas is the willingness of people to risk entering a new commons where they journey together as God’s pilgrim people in order to discern the future that God’s Spirit might be bringing forward to them.”¹²

See also “Liminal.”

Consumption

Since Adam Smith, we have learned to assume that exponential growth is the basic law of economics and that no limits can be set to it. The result is that increased production has become an end in itself.¹³

Churches are successfully turning out consumers rather than disciples. We’ve been asking the wrong questions for so long (‘How do we retain our people?’ or, ‘How do we grow this congregation?’) that it’s been tough to imagine the right questions. The dominant mode of the church in a market culture has been consumption, and to now change the scorecard inevitably means shrinking budgets and shrinking attendance. We are well trained as leaders to measure our own value by our ability to affect bottom lines, so the challenge we face is not only structural but personal. Who are we and what—or to whom—are we called anyway?

William Cavanaugh has done his homework with regard to the cultural milieu of consumption.¹⁴ Cavanaugh notes that the problem with shopping is both its ability to create dissatisfaction with what we have, and its propensity to separate material things from their production. From there we arrive at our current culture where nearly everything is disposable. We know the price of everything, the value of nothing. In essence, our wanting takes precedence over our having. Cavanaugh rightly points out that nothing is wrong with tangible material goods *per se*, but it is the perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction and desire, and the quest to turn everything—and anyone—into a commodity, that is behind the problem of consumerism. Yes—shades of Noam Chomsky.¹⁵

Cavanaugh does a beautiful job of deconstructing the issue through the work of Saint Augustine. For Augustine, the first question is that of freedom. Relative to freedom, desire is not neutral. There are both true and false desires, but apart from a clear *telos* there is no way to judge between them. Here Cavanaugh recognizes the movement of western culture in the past two hundred years. Where once freedom was freedom to pursue the good, now freedom is defined as the ends that give me pleasure, clearly putting self and my personal good on the throne. The reframe I did not expect here was Cavanaugh’s identification of the problem. Many people, under the influence of Buddhist thought, identify the problem as inordinate attachment. Cavanaugh says no, the problem is *detachment*.¹⁶ This is rooted in the dualism we inherited from the Greeks, and the same dualism we quickly baptized via the Enlightenment and our resulting emphasis on an

¹⁰ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 225.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹² Roxburgh, *Op Cit.*, 111.

¹³ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 114.

¹⁴ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*.

¹⁵ Achbar, *Manufacturing Consent*.

¹⁶ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*.

other-worldly salvation. The world is not my home: I'm just passing through. So what matter my stance toward possessions? Combine this position with a right understanding of suffering and we have a nasty stew: Yes, the poor and developing nations suffer in our market economy. But—they'll have their reward in the next life. We neatly absolve ourselves of responsibility on the one hand, while indulging our every personal desire on the other, with no engagement with the biblical call to 'love justice.'

But this problem of detachment is much larger and more nuanced, and its implications are profound. They relate to the fragmentation and mobility of our western world, our lack of stability, and our uprooting. We need to rediscover the theological category of land and its relation to covenant and creation. We need to become rooted in our neighborhoods as the place where God is at work. We need to quit commuting to gathering places across our towns where we are service-providers but not stakeholders, and become rooted and invested in where we live.

Cavanaugh outright identifies consumption as a spiritual discipline. In other words, we are *formed by market forces* as good consumers. He identifies two specific ways in which this occurs: in relation to transcendence and with regard to community. The counter-discipline he identifies is the Eucharist. Others, like Brian McLaren, suggest that our only possible response to the unholy Trinity of money, sex, and power is generosity, fasting, and prayer. Cavanaugh closes chapter two with this:

We are not to cling to our things, but to use them for the sake of the common good. But to have a good relationship with others, it is necessary to have a proper relationship with things. We must understand where our things come from and how our things are produced. Things do not have personalities and lives of their own, but they are embedded in relationships of production and distribution that bring us into contact, for better or for worse, with other people's lives. A sacramental view of the world sees all things as part of God's good creation, potentials signs of the glory of God; things become less disposable, more filled with meaning.¹⁷

Conversation

Finnish sociologist Niklass Luhmann comments that community is a network of conversations. If there is a word that defines the phenomenon of emergence, and that characterizes the heart of the networks that are reflecting together on the gospel and culture, it is conversation. It must be, because conversation generates learning.

Recently organizational theorists have been paying attention to conversation as the fuel of learning communities and the stuff by which organizations learn, adapt and change through shared knowledge. Since change is the order of the day, and since networks are increasingly important to us as we attempt to understand our world toward influencing change, conversation is inextricably linked to leadership.

The most powerful organizational learning and collective knowledge sharing grows through informal relationships and personal networks—via working conversations in communities of practice.¹⁸

In the midst of rapid and discontinuous change, our old modes of engagement and frameworks for thinking about the gospel and culture are no longer effective. In effect, the

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹⁸ Capra, "Creativity and Leadership in Learning Communities," 6.

landscape has changed, and the maps no longer describe the territory. Consequently, we have some unlearning and relearning to do, and this requires crossing traditional boundaries and generating conversations. Sally Morgenthaler quotes Surowiecki:¹⁹

Groups that are too much alike find it harder to keep learning because each member is bringing less and less to the table. Homogeneous groups are great at doing what they do well, but they become progressively less able to investigate alternatives...[They spend] too much time exploiting and not enough time exploring . . . But, if you can assemble a diverse group of people who possess varying degrees of knowledge and insight, you're better off entrusting it with major decisions rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are.²⁰

Conversation has the advantage of slowing us down. The pace of our culture is one of the challenges we face, because the faster we move the less we learn. When the pressure is on, when things are no longer working, we desire a quick fix; we want to rush forward. This is a choice generated by anxiety and fear.

Gary Nelson describes the people of Israel as they move across the Jordan into the promised land.²¹ The ark of the covenant goes before them and it is set up in the middle of the river. God's presence—not our own skills or our courage—secures the ground. Moreover, Israel is not permitted to run ahead. We follow the leadership of the Lord.

But if one danger is to rush ahead, another is, 'let's have another conversation.' Nelson quotes Jonathan Wilson who argues for a third way, participating together in God's grace. We must reframe our attitudes and assumptions, listen to the Holy Spirit, and embrace the process at His pace. "Tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you."²²

The goal is to facilitate emergence. Once we could manage change because we understood and could control all the components of our systems. But with escalating complexity, this is no longer possible. Instead we have to surf the edge of chaos. This requires nurturing a network of conversations. Fritjof Capra writes that we must, "facilitate emergence by creating a learning culture, by encouraging continual questioning and rewarding innovation. In other words, leadership means creating conditions, rather than giving directions."²³

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¹⁹ Morgenthaler, "Leadership in a Flattened World."

²⁰ Ibid., 175ff.

²¹ Nelson, *Borderland Churches*, 31.

²² Ibid., 34.

²³ Capra, *The Hidden Connections*, 111.