

**“CAN YOU TELL ME HOW TO GET OUT OF SESAME STREET?”  
THE PROBLEM OF ANEMIA WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

By Dr. Paul R. Shockley © 12 March 2014

**I. PROBLEM 1: AESTHETIC HUNGER IN A CHURCH THAT GIVES US A SMALL  
GIVE OF GOD:**

- A. When we worship God in a corporate setting, I suspect some of us leave our Sunday services rather anemic. Discontent, frustrated, malnourished, and weak, the corporate worship service did not qualitatively stir our minds, hearts, and wills, enrich our love-relationship with both God and one another unto His glory. Given the privilege and command to exalt our one and only Triune God in an assembly where brothers and sisters in Christ are united together, expressing His worth-ship, how is it even possible that our actual worship experiences fall short of what they could be? Better stated, *“Why do worship services often fail to meaningfully nourish us?”*
- B. Yet in many other areas of our lives we have very significant experiences that truly enrich our daily lives in qualitative ways; they feed the whole person. Listening to some live music with some dear friends, painting a canvas with oils, having a thought-provoking conversation with a bright person who is eager to learn and grow, playing sports, participating a dinner party, or meeting the practical needs of others can be quite meaningful, memorable, nourishing, and substantive. See, there is a certain irony here... for the one place where nourishing aesthetic experiences should take place, that is, the local church, is the one place where it is not taking place yet we have find important aesthetic experiences outside of the local church to be plentiful. Could this be a reason why people visit or even leave our church to never return... more fulfilling experiences are found elsewhere?

***Why?***

- C. One reason why so many of us leave our worship services malnourished is because our view of God is poor. God is small in vision because our worship services have unnecessary aesthetic roadblocks that are keeping us from beholding our glorious God such as musicians who lead the congregations in worship in mechanical ways with a short rotation list of songs; sermons where the illustrations are always the same; indulgent chaotic expressions of worship that are self-centered rather than God-centered; restatement of doctrine without ever truly expositing or unpacking the passage being examined are just a few examples.
- D. ***How we worship reflects our understanding of whom we worship.*** Would our worship of Him significantly change if Jesus entered into our worship services? Let me put it this way, our corporate worship services can either enlarge or diminish our view of God depending upon how we go about worshipping Him!
- E. In his classic book, *Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer states it this way:

So necessary to the Church is a lofty concept of God that when that concept in any measure declines, the Church with her worship and her moral standards declines along with it. The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say:

The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him-and of her. In all her prayers and labors this should have first place.<sup>2</sup>

- F. Sadly, when our view of God is diminished in our worship services, a vacuum is created whereby we seek satisfaction from other venues. Stated differently, when we poorly worship God, aesthetic anemia can find pertinent expression in our lives. In other words, when the worship experience falls short of what it could be, especially on a regular basis, our understanding of God grows dim and spiritual anemia emerges among the young and even the mature. Our attention is directed elsewhere.
- G. Because we possess, an inherent thirst for beauty since we were originally created to be intimate fellowship with our God, when God is **not** the object of those existential affections, we can find ourselves, and perhaps easily so, feasting on what is readily available and attractive, the cheap and perhaps even the vulgar. Those experiences may even be memorable, even taste good, but they are also unhealthy. An appetite for unhealthy experiences can lead us places we never thought we would go.

## II. PROBLEM 2: CAN'T SEEM TO LIVE RIGHTLY ON SESAME STREET:

- A. "Sesame Street" offers a grocery store, an apartment complex, and even a larger than life friendly bird, but never a church. Until now! Our culture has met the only void on the block. Though one might not see Bert, Ernie, Grover, and Elmo sitting in the pews, it won't take very long to recognize the familiar ditties, the attractions for short attention spans, the humor, and the flashy images to perk your interest.
- B. In his thought-provoking 1985 work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which is now in its 20<sup>th</sup> edition, the late Neil Postman contends that the perils of television are infecting us with a growing appetite for nonsensical amusement.<sup>3</sup> Taken in by "dangerous nonsense," we are losing ourselves in amusement, becoming distracted, diverted, and immobilized intellectually, emotionally, and in all spheres of social and political

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God: Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961, 1992), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Idem.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Penguin Press, 1985, 2005).

discourse. While thirsting for the trivial, the popular, and the sensational, we have become bored with serious inquiry, analysis, argumentation, and reasoned discourse. Thus, we are losing opportunities, perhaps at an unprecedented rate given the amount of knowledge and social utilities at our digital fingertips, to make our lives count for something great. In fact, Postman writes:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversations becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in a short a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act [a variety show], then a nation finds itself at risk; culture death is a clear possibility.<sup>4</sup>

- C. To be sure, Postman is not against technology. In fact, he argues that the solution to the dumbing down of people is not to shut down technology.<sup>5</sup> Instead, he brings to the forefront one fundamental principle: **how we learn is as important as what learn.** In view of the impact of the infusion of amusements in this digital world in which we now live, Postman’s social commentary resonates more than ever.
- D. Unfortunately, and perhaps due to the pervasive fallacy of reductionism, namely, focusing on one area of thought to the neglect of all others, too many churches fail to understand or willfully ignore that *how we learn is as important as what we learn.* But whatever the source is for ignoring this critical insight, the church needs to address their relationship to “Sesame Street” in a proactive and healthy manner.
- E. In his analysis of television education, Postman examines the impact of shows like “Sesame Street.” The goal of “Sesame Street” is obvious. He writes, “Its use of cute puppets, celebrities, catchy tunes, and rapid-fire editing was certain to give pleasure to the children and world therefore serve as adequate preparation for their entry into a fun-loving culture.”<sup>6</sup>
- F. Yet, the very manner in which we learn from shows like “Sesame Street” is undermining the nourishing interplay that is critically needed between the educator, the student, and the setting. Considering the following:

The learning experience is not as nourishing when you are in a private setting away (your den) and not in a place where social interaction takes place;

No interaction with the teacher as compared to settings where interaction with the teacher takes place;

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 144.

Educational shows demand attention to images and not to the development of language;

Watching TV is an act of choice (you do not have to turn it on) whereas attending school is a legal requirement.

There are no penalties if you do not watch TV versus a setting where attendance is required.

No public decorum is needed versus proper behavior at school.

Moreover, Postman observes, "Whereas in a classroom, fun is never more than a means to an end, on television it is the end in itself."<sup>7</sup>

- G. Postman goes on to acutely observe three commandments that flow from the philosophy of education which television offers. The **first commandment** is that no prerequisites are needed. Postman states:

Every television program must be a complete package in itself. No previous knowledge is to be required.... The learner must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice.... In doing away with the idea of sequence in education, television undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself.<sup>8</sup>

- H. The **second commandment** that flows from the philosophy of education which television offers is that no perplexity is allowed. Postman explains:

This means that there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied, or worse of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story, or idea can be immediately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount.<sup>9</sup>

- I. Lastly, the **third commandment** is the greatest enemy of television-teaching, namely, the avoidance of serious exposition. He asserts:

Arguments, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse turn television into radio, or worse, third-rate printed manner. Thus, television-teaching always takes the form of story-telling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music....

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 148-9.

- J. As a result of these three commandments, Postman states, “The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity and exposition is entertainment.”<sup>10</sup>
- K. Reflecting upon insights in relation to many of our worship services, I have come to the conclusion that many of our churches suffer the same threefold malady: No prerequisites are needed; perplexity is avoided; serious thinking is neglected.
- L. ***Example One: The Sensational Church:***

For example, there is one type of church which I describe as the “Sensational Church,” that seeks to entertain the masses without an intentional and effective way to assimilate them into serious inquiry, thinking, and reflection about Christian life, practice, and thought in such a way that they make their lives count for something great, namely, thinking like and living like Jesus Christ in all spheres of daily living. While the worship services may be memorable with all of its flash, sensations, and antics, they fail to qualitatively feed the whole person, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, in order that they may consistently habitually live out a biblical worldview. While attention may be arrested, no demand is made to actively interact in the worship service. Thus, like sitting before a TV show, the audience is in a passive state, absorbing but not growing. Saturated with what might be good and well-meaning, this type of church has failed to offer what is best. They trivialized the time slot that was given to them and did not seize each moment, living for that which matters most. They did not take advantage to learn from the past, integrate thought and life, and use resources in such a way that lifts up what it truly means to be a committed disciple of Jesus Christ.

- M. In sum, this type of church has become “Sesame Street.” Their distinctiveness and impact is not what it could be for they have become a puppet of culture, imitating the trivialities they see elsewhere. The possibility to offer a great vision of God is lost. A. W. Tozer puts it this way back in 1961:

It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.<sup>11</sup>  
.... The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.<sup>12</sup>

- N. ***Example 2: The Blind Church:***

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>11</sup> Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 5.

On the other hand, there are other unhealthy churches who fail to realize that they too are on “Sesame Street.” Refusing to acknowledge the ever-changing cultural context in which they are imbedded, these churches only offer truth through mediums of the past. I describe this type of church as the “Blind Church.” Unfortunately, the church’s leadership fails to recognize that these mediums for which truth is proclaimed are relics, viewed as ineffective by those who walk down “Sesame Street.” But they *keep on* playing the 8-tracks, using the reel-to-reel films while glorying in the past while declining or even snubbing what is before them in the present. They fail to express a significant vision/purpose that meets people where they are. As a result of refusing to seize the opportunity to meet people where they are, like the apostle Paul did on Mars Hill, these churches are ignored by the masses. Why? The manner in which they offer truth is uninteresting, uninviting, and disconnected from where people are. Coupled with bombastic, dogmatic, elitist, and ungracious attitudes by some of the leaders, attendees, or both those who live on “Sesame Street” see no reason to step through the church doors.

1. While spinning their wheels in the absence of fresh creativity, the blind church’s programming is all the same. No changes. No anticipation. No vision. The blind church settles for only a restatement of what they believe, expressed in the “rutted” manner of which they are familiar. Thus, championing the routine, the hum-drum, they no longer demand prerequisites. See, everything is already anticipated. There is no ongoing sequence, no qualitative development, and no tension for they choose to isolate themselves from active engagement from culture that may be identified as “Sesame Street.” In sum, *the routine governs activity, thought, and life. A result, no on-going need for prerequisites are necessary.*
2. Instead of engaging an ever-changing culture, which generates perplexity, the blind church on “Sesame Street” only seeks to do what has been done before. As a result of their love for familiarity, qualitative growth is stunted. Why? They are only interested in the restatement of what they have learned and in the manner in which they learned it. As a result, *there is no perplexity because the content is all together familiar. Change is too much to bear.*
3. Some people who live, move, and have their becoming in the blind church, assert themselves from a position of wanting to hear a restatement of biblical truth to a position of judging to determine whether what they have learned will be said the same way. For example, some choose to listen to the sermon to determine if it measures up in the same form rather than assimilating what is true.
4. Lastly, because these churches seek to only state what they already know, there are no fresh arguments, analyses, and reasoned discourse. Excitement and passion is displaced by the familiar. Absent are fresh ways in reaching an ever-changing culture. The excitement and passion that is generated by engaging the changes that surround them are displaced. See, the blind

church, intentionally or unintentionally, does not seek to truly understand the nature and ways of “Sesame Street.” They do not seriously seek to meet these occupants where they are and earnestly bring them where they need to be. The people must conform to the *mores* or customs of the church subculture before the church people will accept them. As a result, what the blind church offers is amusement cloaked in the routine. Therefore, what accompanies a lack of change is a lack of critical thinking and engagement; serious inquiries, analyses, and discussions are exchanged for restatement of what they already know. No more thinking is required.

### III. THREE-FOLD MALADY FOR TWO POLARIZED CHURCHES:

- A. The irony is that while these two types of churches, that is, the church that *mirrors* “Sesame Street” and the church that is *blind* to “Sesame Street,” are polarized from each other in their worship activities. They both suffer from the same three-fold malady: no prerequisites, no perplexity, and no exposition.
- B. Consider the fact that the audiences in both churches are in a passive position of learning. They sit and observe. Nothing is demanded from them; they are reduced to becoming a spectator rather than an active participant.
- C. But these two types of churches not only lose opportunities to offer nourishing and meaningful interactions with those who walk to and fro on “Sesame Street,” they also lose their effectiveness. How? Both churches fail to ask something great from us in relation to all the changes that continually occur in culture and what the God of the Bible demands from us. Because no qualitative growth finds expression, the church doors, whether it is the church that reflects “Sesame Street” or is blind to “Sesame Street,” revolve with people wanting to move to another street where more aesthetic, enriching, and fulfilling activities can be found.

### IV. A CLOSER LOOK AT AESTHETIC ANEMIA AND THE LOCAL CHURCH:

- A. Aesthetic experiences, which can take place in any given activity, are divine gifts to both the believer and the unbeliever. We pursue and long for aesthetic experiences! We work our schedules around aesthetic experiences whether it is going to a music concert, playing golf with good friends, seeing beautiful places like the Grand Canyon, or celebrating a community event. We relish in them! Aesthetic experiences are not only a gift from God given to all, an element of common grace, but it is also one that meaningfully touches us in a world that is replete with personal and social deprivation, loneliness, loss, pain, and tragedy. I am defining an aesthetic experience is an enlightening, intense, and memorable moment that involves participation, perception, and appreciation. Aesthetic experiences can touch the deep struggles of the human soul as we yearn for fulfillment, identity, meaning, and purpose. Beauty is often tied to the existential aspects of our human condition; beauty drives us in some of the most dramatic ways.

- B. While there can be other factors at work in our church services, such as certain diversions (e.g., storm), habitual sins, fleshly tendencies, or certain problems they bring into the church and can't seem to cast upon God, aesthetic anemia comes into fruition when four events take place:
1. When the congregation focuses on aspect of worship to the neglect of all other related aspects. Thus, in the context of worship services, there could be a tendency to focus on worship by music to the neglect of worship by the study of God's Word or vice versa. I call this the fallacy of reductionism.
  2. The functional use of the arts is ignored, done poorly or are indulgent, they rob us of potential opportunities to focus on God. From benevolent opportunities to allow non-talented voices to do solos to church decorations that are poorly done... they can all become roadblocks.
  3. When any given worship service swings to either two non-aesthetic extremes, namely, a humdrum, mechanical, mindless, or routine manner or a chaotic, disconnected, or disorganized manner, the worship service becomes non-aesthetic.
  4. Lastly, worship services can fall short of what they could have been when there is either too little effort or too much effort (doing/activity) or excessive or deficient in the particular setting where the worship service is taking place. For example, mechanical or indulgent prayers, disinterested or patronizing greetings, meaningless traditions or anti-traditions, disconnected Scripture readings or "over the top readings," overused patterns of speech in sermons to indulgent to excessive, exploitative manipulation of the emotions, can be factors that contribute to aesthetic anemia.
- C. But we must also consider the church's relationship to the community in which it is imbedded.
1. When churches exclude or separate themselves from the community or are absorbed by the community, they lose their distinctiveness in reaching the community for Jesus Christ. By separating from the community, the church loses the opportunity to be "salt" and "light." As a result, their impact will not be as great as it could be, qualitative growth may be lacking, and creativity becomes stunted.
  2. When the church is absorbed by the community, it becomes indistinguishable from the community. This type of church becomes deficient, failing to offer a distinctive voice filled with real hope. Thus, people leave the place that was originally designed to best address their greatest needs.

## V. CONCLUSION:

- A. In one of my favorite pieces of writing by C. S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Tool Shed,” this splendid author and thinker shares an experience he once had. He writes:

I was standing today in the dark tool shed. The sun was shining outside and though the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood the beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost-pitch black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no tool shed and (above all) no beam. Instead, I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.<sup>13</sup>

1. Likewise, don’t merely look at that which is aesthetic; follow it along to God Himself. If we only look at we may fail to follow it along to God Himself. But pursue the looking at with excellence unto the glory of God because art products or activities that are done poorly, neglected, or are indulgent may keep us from following them along to the God of the Bible. Never be satisfied with poor workmanship.
- B. Refuse to allow worship services to become preoccupied with the trivial, be governed by the routine, the mechanical, the chaotic, or the indulgent. Do not even allow what is good to become the enemy of what is best. When worship activities are done in these ways, they become unnecessary roadblocks that can dim our opportunities to behold God. While many in our culture have been raised on “Sesame Street,” as those who belong to the Father of creativity, we can surely think of engaging ways of excellence to stretch minds, grows hearts, and deepen souls while not becoming a puppet on “Sesame Street.” Prerequisites can be offered; perplexity can be encouraged, and exposition given.
- C. Although “Sesame Street” was a nice place to hang out for a while, most of us were glad for the opportunity to *move on*. Similarly, those who are occupied with the trivial and the mundane will relish in opportunities to dynamically grow, experience a new depth of faith, and anticipate new horizons whereby their vision of God increases, not decreases, where aesthetic hunger is nourished best, and souls dynamically changed unto the glory of God. Like A.W. Tozer states:

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<sup>13</sup> Originally published in *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* (July 17, 1945); reprinted in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 212-15.

The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him-and of her. In all her prayers and labors this should have first place. We do the greatest service to the next generation of Christians by passing on to them undimmed and undiminished that noble concept of God which we received from our Hebrew and Christian Fathers of generations past. This will prove of greater value to them than anything that art or science can do.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 6.