

Jehovah Java:
Lessons for the Church from a Coffeehouse

by

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This is a tale of two stories that are at first glance completely unrelated. One is called the *Divine Comedy*, the other, a divine commodity. One is the story of redemption and is of mythic proportions. The other, the history of coffee, is notable only for its apparent commonness. The former, presented in the Bible, begins in a garden and culminates in eschatological hope, with Israel of God — the church — being presented to Christ as His radiant bride, perfected to worship for eternity. The latter, shrouded in myth, begins in ancient Eastern Africa where, legend has it, a goatherd noticed an unusual liveliness in his animals after they ate the red berries from a particular bush. The goatherd tried them himself, discovering that they boosted his energy level. Over the next few centuries, the bush was cultivated and the berries harvested, dried, and sold. Thus, the coffee trade began and is still a thriving industry perhaps best typified, at least in the United States, by the seemingly pervasive purveyor of coffee with the Melvillian moniker, Starbucks. The story of the birth and growth of Starbucks is recounted in *Pour Your Heart Into It*, the biography of Howard Schultz, chairman and CEO of Starbucks. The stories have been identified, but where they intersect is not yet clear.

Coffee never appears in the Bible and biblical revelation, so far as I know, bears no influence on Starbucks — either on the company's inception or current well-being. No, the connection between the church and Starbucks is not the result of some unlikely set of circumstances; rather, it is found in me, and thousands like me, who happen to be followers of Christ *and* employed by Starbucks. The connection is found in the hearts and minds of believers who seek to integrate all of life in a cohesive whole, informed and shaped by the revealed word and the Word Incarnate. This paper is the coalescence of much thought in recent months

concerning the nature and purpose of the church: how individual believers function within it and how both relate to culture. As far as I know, Howard Schultz is not a follower of Christ; indeed, his company is very much a product of contemporary culture and values. That notwithstanding, it is my contention that the story of Starbucks has much to offer, by way of implication, to the church. It must be said from the outset that this is not an attempt to elevate Starbucks to the level of the church or hold up Starbucks as a model for the church. Rather, I would go so far as to say that scripture, rightly interpreted and applied, makes such analysis redundant. However, I believe the church in its present state is suffering from an identity crisis of its own making and would, therefore, benefit from a critique, as it were, from Balaam's donkey. To put it in a positive way, let us do like Israel of old and plunder the coffers of Egypt for gold that may later be melted down for the purposes of fashioning implements for the worship of God in our midst.

Don't ask a fish...

An old Hindu proverb says, "If you want to know the nature of water, don't ask a fish." The reason for this is the fish is incapable of giving any other perspective outside its own. It is trapped in its own little world and cannot escape. Likewise, it is with a measure of humility that I attempt an evaluation of our time, because I both live in it and am a product of it. The most frequent term applied to the philosophic climate of our day is postmodernism. Such is the postmodern view of the inherent vacuity of language that some would argue that any attempt to define the term is, by definition, futile. However, presuming that I am at least communicating something intelligible in the words of this paper, there are at least a few things that can be said about this era in which we find ourselves. Dr. Jimmy Long, a regional director of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in the Blue Ridge Region, notes three general characteristics of postmodernism.

One trend is a shift of focus *from the autonomous self to tribalism*. This transition to tribalism or community involves people needing other people.... A second attribute of postmodern culture is the movement *from basing decisions on truth to basing them on preferences*.... The final characteristic of postmodern culture is a movement *from belief in human progress to hopelessness*. [Italics original]¹

These three critical areas (community, ambiguity of truth, and despair) form the underlying fabric of much of the present discussion. It is also important to note that postmodernism is not so much an evolution (or devolution) from modernity, but is, rather, a critique of and reaction to the Enlightenment experiment which has dominated the West from the end of the Dark Ages until the last few decades. As Eastern philosophy began to permeate the West after the Second World War, it found a willing handmaiden in the radical skepticism and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 70s. It is no coincidence that Seattle, as a crossroads of East and West, emerged as a center for this socio-cultural and philosophic fermentation. When Starbucks opened its first store in Seattle in the spring of 1971, it was very much at the right place at the right time.

Apple to apples...

If necessity is the mother of invention, then invention is the mother of change. As society began to change radically, it is no wonder that business models began to change as well. The Seattle of the 60s and 70s “was just beginning to shed its image as an exotic, isolated corner of America.”² At the time, a growing number of Americans, many of whom lived in the Pacific Northwest, began to reject the trend towards processed and pre-packaged foods and began to live a more “organic” life-style. Out of passion for coffee in the European tradition, Jerry Baldwin, a former English teacher, and Gordon Bowker, a writer, established a small shop in the historic Pike Place Market of Seattle. They did not sell espresso; they did not sell lattes; the Frappuccino was decades in the future. What they did sell was whole-bean coffee, grinders, and high-end coffee makers. They had no designs on a multi-national corporation with trademark status; they

were committed to rich and exotic coffee and educating clientele one person at a time. Their focus was on people and how coffee could enhance lives, and they quietly went about their business as the world changed around them.

Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of the paradigmatic shifts underway in corporate America was the challenge of the commercial Goliath, International Business Machines (IBM), by a David-like upstart, Apple Computers. IBM stood for all that was capable of being accomplished in a Newtonian universe. Large and inflexible, not to mention indomitable, homogeneity and ubiquity were its hallmarks. Meanwhile, Steve Jobs, reared in a quantum universe, created a corporate model committed to staying small and supple, ready to change at a moment's notice. IBM controlled the market by sheer size; Apple was committed to a revolution of innovation. Apple's now infamous commercial advertising the release of the first Macintosh computer portrayed IBM in Orwellian, "Big Brother" fashion with Apple heralding a new age of freethinking. While it is debatable how successful the Apple coup was in the long-run, a change in corporate culture was secured. The "bottom line" of a profit and loss statement was no longer the most important criteria of a successful business. What a company stood for now had a place in business strategy. The stage was set for a company like Starbucks to enter.

The siren call...

In the spring of 1982, Howard Schultz joined Jerry Baldwin and Gordon Bowker at Starbucks as director of retail operations in management. Already successful in retail sales with Xerox and Hammarplast (a distributor of high-end kitchen equipment and house-wares), Schultz and his wife, Sheri, decided to leave their roots in New York City and move to Seattle. He was convinced that there was something different about Starbucks, a company he had discovered almost by accident when he noticed they sold more of a particular type of coffee maker than any

other company. “Starbucks’ founders understood a fundamental truth about selling: to mean something to customers, you should assume intelligence and sophistication and inform those who are eager to learn. If you do, what may seem to be a niche market could very well appeal to far more people than you imagine.”³ This was the first piece of the Starbucks equation.

The second piece came during a trip to Milan in 1983. Schultz encountered espresso and espresso bar culture for the first time. He was already committed to fine coffee, but he became suddenly aware that something was missing.

As I watched, I had a revelation: Starbucks had missed the point — completely missed it. *This is so powerful!* I thought. *This is the link.* The connection to the people who loved coffee did not have to take place only in their homes, where they ground and brewed whole-bean coffee. What we had to do was unlock the romance and mystery of coffee, firsthand, in coffee bars. The Italians understood the personal relationship that people could have to coffee, its social aspect. I couldn’t believe that Starbucks was in the coffee business, yet was overlooking so central an element of it.⁴

Upon his return from Italy, Howard Schultz immediately presented his discovery to the other partners at Starbucks — they were less than enthusiastic. Undaunted and convinced he was right, Schultz left Starbucks in 1985 to launch a small chain of shops, Il Giornale, selling brewed coffee and espresso drinks. Within two years, Schultz’ success allowed him to purchase Starbucks when the founding members decided to focus on another business venture in California.

At the time, it seemed like a huge gamble on a relatively new way of doing business. Coffee was nothing new; it is, after all, the second largest traded commodity in the world after oil.⁵ However, to serve it in a specialty shop at gourmet prices appeared to be a “difficult sale.” Howard Schultz, reading the times, remained undeterred.

What we proposed to do at Il Giornale, I told [investors], was to reinvent a commodity. We would take something old and tired and common — coffee — and weave a sense of romance and community around it. We would rediscover the mystique and charm that had swirled around coffee throughout the centuries. We would enchant customers with an atmosphere of sophistication and style and knowledge.⁶

It was this “new” way of looking at an old, old story that gave Starbucks an edge on the market, but with 17 stores in three cities, Starbucks was a long way from making a name for itself on a global scale. What was missing was a third piece of the equation: commitment to people within the organization.

One of the values instilled in Howard Schultz from an early age was the importance of creating a company committed not just to the bottom line but to the individual employee, even at the lowest levels. Growing up in the projects of New York and watching his father continually demeaned and treated in a way that robbed him of dignity and self-respect left quite an impression on Schultz in later years. In 1990, Starbucks as a company ratified the Mission Statement that has become its hallmark as a next-generation business model. What “emerged from that process puts people first and profits last. It’s not a trophy to decorate our office walls, but an organic body of beliefs, not a list of aspirations but a foundation of guiding principles we hold in common.”⁷ This unique commitment on the part of Starbucks emerges in such notable ways as access to full medical benefits and stock options, even for part-time employees working as little as 20 hours per week. Being founded on values has made Starbucks a company that fosters trust in its employees — in fact, employees are called “partners” from the moment they are hired. About this relationship, Schultz comments, “There is no more precious commodity than the relationship of trust and confidence a company has with its employees. If people believe management is not fairly sharing the rewards, they will feel alienated.”⁸

Starbucks is also committed to causes outside the walls of the individual store. This commitment to community involvement creates a sense of “local-ness” for every store. Discovering and reinforcing local values and causes is a part of opening each new store location. Starbucks makes an active and conscious decision to foster an environment that can be a “Third

Place,” a place outside the home or office where people can find respite from the pressures of the day. “Americans,” says Schultz, “are so hungry for a community that some of our customers began gathering in our stores, making appointments with friends, holding meetings, striking up conversations with other regulars. Once we understood the powerful need for a Third Place, we were able to respond....”⁹ By simply reading the times, Howard Schultz was able to found a company that meets head-on many of the distinctions of postmodern culture, a desire for community in an environment of shared values that can provide hope in a troubling world.

Will the real church please stand up...

But where is the church in all this? Again, I want to assert that this is not a forum for church-bashing. The church is nothing less than redeemed humanity on earth and, as such, has a divine mission to be a conduit of redemptive grace to the world. What is at issue is why does a company like Starbucks stand in such contrast to the church? Is not the church committed to community? Is not the church committed to truth? Is not the church committed to conveying a message of hope to the world? I believe the answer to these questions is both yes — and no. The reason for this is because the church is in the midst of an identity crisis brought about by a radical dualism (between “spiritual” and “earthly” things) and the invasion of modernism (especially in church authority structures). The church is no longer defined by who she is but, rather, by what she does. With this loss of identity comes a loss of passion and an erosion of purpose in the world. In the remainder of my paper, I will address the nature of the church, argue that the church is perfectly designed to meet the postmodern world on its own terms, and discuss the means whereby this can be accomplished.

Melting down the gold...

Much debate has ensued during the last century and a half over the nature of the church and her place in the plan of God. While I find the debate interesting and important to biblical understanding, it is not my intention to perpetuate the debate but, instead, to highlight biblical language concerning the church that is held in agreement. Edmund P. Clowney describes the church in this way:

According to the Bible, the church is the people of God, the assembly and body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Each of these views of the church has been favoured in one of the major ecclesiastical heritages. The Reformed family of churches has emphasized the church as the people of God; the sacramental churches as the body of Christ; the Anabaptist churches as the disciples of Christ; and the Pentecostal churches as the fellowship of the Spirit. No doubt we are all guilty of tunnel vision, focusing on one model.¹⁰

Without minimizing the other traditions Clowney mentions, and thereby falling into the trap of “tunnel vision,” I would like to draw out one characteristic of the church that is particularly helpful when addressing the postmodern world: the church as the body of Christ. This language is rife with imagery. Vine’s makes the observation that language about the body of Christ in the church is rooted in the idea of the Incarnation.¹¹ Clowney concurs and elaborates, “Our union with Christ is, first of all, representative. Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ begins with Christ’s physical body hanging on the cross.... Secondly, our union with Christ is vital. We are joined with him as branches to the vine.... Union with Christ, both representative and vital, is sealed by the presence of and work of Christ’s Spirit in his people.”¹² It is important to recognize that the body of Christ language is more than just a convenient metaphor in Paul’s theology; it is in fact a forensic reality. The body lives not merely by analogy, but in actuality. “The church shows the *organic life* of Christ’s body: it lives as an organism, not just an organization.”¹³ This is significant because how the church views itself is determinative to how

it will organize its structure. In other words, if the church is organic, we are necessarily dependent on one another. Dietrich Bonhoeffer seizes on this idea as the foundation for his view of community in *Life Together*.

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.... We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.¹⁴

To be interdependent is vital to the health of the church; to function otherwise does not change the nature of the church but hampers our ability to nurture a sense of community and therefore our ability to be the voice of truth in our world. If the church fails to recognize who she is apart from her function, then action will no longer emerge from essence, but vice versa, and the church will try to draw significance and sustenance from activity that it can neither give nor sustain. He is the Vine, we are the branches. We must draw our life from Him.

Once this is firmly established in our hearts and minds, that we are a living body which draws its life from Christ alone, we will be free to be a community of believers committed to truth in a manner unique only to the church. This is so because Jesus did not merely claim to *know* truth, He made the radical claim to *be* truth. If this is so, then our concept of truth as merely objective must be reconsidered. Truth in a Christian worldview is not only objective, it is at the same time intensely subjective. Parker Palmer picks up on this idea in his book, *To Know As We Are Known*: “By Christian understanding, truth is neither ‘out there’ nor ‘in here,’ but both. Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of knowers and knowns who are understood as independent but accountable selves.”¹⁵ This gains even greater significance when we consider the postmodern view of truth as socially constructed. If we are a people committed to truth as a Person and not merely an ideal, we will be able to create a “space

where obedience to truth is practiced,” which is Palmer’s phrase to describe the essence of teaching. Truth is no longer “outside the camp” but walking in our midst and uniting us forensically.

When Jesus said, ‘I am...the truth,’ he was not making an idiosyncratic claim about a private individual, not inviting us into an isolated relationship that is either the whole of what we must know or separable from all the rest... [H]e was announcing and incarnating a new understanding of reality and our relation to it. Truth — wherever it may be found and in whatever form — is personal, to be known in personal relationships.¹⁶

With the Incarnation serving as the foundation for both community and our relationship to truth, the church is liberated from her need to draw identity from function and can focus on providing hope to a world mired in despair.

So great is this need for hope that even Howard Schultz acknowledges it when he says, “We’re all so hungry for a hero, for a story that rings true, that everyone can relate to. We’re all eager for something upbeat, something honest, something authentic.”¹⁷ The sad irony is that his solution to the problem is a vanilla latte or a caramel macchiato, as if a temporary pleasure will assuage the haunting feelings of hopelessness. Hope that is abiding comes only through putting to death the enmity between the person and God. Only through the atoning blood of Christ can we have peace with God. And that is where the church as herald of the gospel of grace can meet the postmodern dilemma head-on. We do not live in a world that is so far removed from the time of the early church. Indeed, some writers have noted that we live in a culture more akin to the first century culture than any that has existed in the intervening time. If this is so, then the message of hope, both for life now and with a view to the eschaton, is more than relevant in our time. Ours is a hope that abides because “He is our peace.”

All the right things for all the wrong reasons...

I will conclude here with a personal note and a few observations. Starbucks is a wonderful company for which to work and has afforded me benefits I would not have had access to otherwise. It is important that I make the observation that while Starbucks has created an environment that is at once appealing and stimulating as a partner and as a customer, it has done so without a worldview that ultimately can sustain it. To be treated with dignity and respect is a good thing; to be treated as an image-bearer of Christ is far better. To have a sense of community at work is wonderful; to have “community through and in Jesus Christ” is far better. To enjoy a grandé Americano or grandé-with-whip-mocha-Frappuccino brightens my day; to enjoy fellowship with God through the atoning blood of Christ is infinitely (and eternally) better. Starbucks is a great company, but the church is the glory of God and the bride of Christ. We are His hands. We are His feet. We are His assembly. We are salt and light to the world. The church is a means of grace for the world and its transformation. The church is “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”¹⁸

¹ Jimmy Long, "Generating Hope: a Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation," in *Telling the Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 325-326.

² Howard Schultz and Dori Yang Jones, *Pour Your Heart Into It* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1997), 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵ According to statistical data provided by the International Coffee Organization; available from <http://www.ico.org/acoff/cofstor.htm>; Internet; accessed 7 April 2003.

⁶ Schultz, *Pour Your Heart*, 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 28.

¹¹ W. E. Vine *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, no date), 138.

¹² Clowney, *The Church*, 63-64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), 21.

¹⁵ Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 55-56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷ Schultz, *Pour Your Heart*, 336.

¹⁸ Col. 1:27 (NASB)