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A reflective reply to Clayton Coomb's *Unapologetic Apology for Megachurch Worship Practices* – (and an introduction to German idealism for Christians)

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Abstract

In a recent keynote address published in the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*, Clayton Coombs presented an *unapologetic apologetic* for contemporary, communal worship in the Christian megachurch context (*Journal of Contemporary Ministry*, Issue 6 2022). The basis for his argument was a correlation between features of megachurch worship praxis and Christian revivals; interpreting the former through the lens of the latter provided for Coombs undeniable evidence of divine imprimatur upon megachurch worship praxis. This article offers a reflective reply to Coombs, with particular focus on the dichotomy of reason and revelatory experience in Coombs' implicit epistemology. By recourse to German idealist philosophy, particularly the work of Immanuel Kant, F. H. Jacobi and G. W. F. Hegel, I will show where arguments such as Coombs' have previously been made – based on a similar epistemological approach – and why utilising 'God-says-so' arguments in the context of Christian discourse, a method central to Coombs' epistemological defence of megachurch worship, raises important ethical and relational questions.

Key words: Pentecostalism, divine command theory, theological ethics, German idealism, Kant, Jacobi, Hegel, theological language, religious epistemology, worship

The welcome mat

In a recent keynote address published in the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*, Clayton Coombs presented an *unapologetic apologetic* for contemporary, communal worship in the Christian megachurch context (2022).[29] The basis for his argument was a correlation between the features of megachurch worship praxis and Christian revivals; interpreting the former through the lens of the latter provided for Coombs undeniable evidence of divine imprimatur upon megachurch worship praxis. For those already convinced of the value and transformative nature of megachurch worship styles, his apologetic could only bolster existing positions. Yet there was an undeniable tension woven throughout Coombs' piece, centred around the division between faith and analytical thought. It is this dimension of Coombs' address, particularly the epistemological separation between faith and thought, and the implicit presence of a 'God-says-so' argument (an expression of divine command theory), that I will pick up as a stimulus for productive discussion—albeit leading into perhaps surprising terrain.

My hope is to invite Coombs, and others who think along similar lines, to consider reframing their 'God's-eye-view' language via reflection on its ethical and relational consequences. I hope my thoughts will also affirm those who are disquieted by God-says-so arguments by demonstrating *why* their disquiet is valuable and ethically warranted. Implicitly (and explicitly), this is an exploration of the consequences of applying a reason–revelation dichotomy to interpretations of the action and presence of God.

Where logic doesn't fly

Coombs' primary contention could be formulated in several syllogistic ways, with subtle differences, and without any change to the primary faith-focused assertion of his discourse:

> Megachurch worship resembles historic revivals;
>
> Revivals are an act of God;
>
> *Therefore* megachurch worship is an act of God.
>
> Megachurch worship is an act of God;

[29] See Clayton Coombs, "Sounds of Revival: An Unapologetic Apology for Megachurch Worship Practices", *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* 6 (2022), 9–19.

Revivals are an act of God;

Therefore megachurch worship resembles historical revivals.

We might even put it this way:

Megachurch worship is an act of God;

Revivals are an act of God;

Therefore they share key characteristics

and should both be accepted as acts of God.

The variables here are (a) megachurches, (b) their worship praxis and (c) historical revivals, but regardless of the order in which these variables are arranged, their presupposition, primary cause and ultimate justification is *God*, without whom the arguments fall apart. I will therefore refer to Coombs' article as having made a 'God-says-so' argument, predicated on divine command theory.

Coombs' apologetic is in part a response to the 2017 analysis of contemporary Christian worship practices by Lim and Ruth (2017). While he affirms much of this work, Coombs believes that Lim and Ruth are mistaken in ascribing megachurch growth to human causes; it is rather a sign of God's action (pp. 13–15). He also reminds readers that prolific musical generativity and the impetus towards contemporary language in worship—hallmark traits of megachurch praxis—are not new phenomena. Coombs traces several historical instances of prolific song generation in Christian history, from the Wesleyan Methodist revival back to the Reformation, citing Luther's own penchant for the composition of hymns (pp. 15–17). He links this artistic generativity with the pervasive desire (often present in times of historical Christian revivals) for the gospel message to be shared in the vernacular—as, for example, in Luther's translation of scripture from Latin into German. This impetus toward Christian vernacular expression was also evident (Coombs notes) in other eras of great receptiveness to the Christian gospel, such as in the time of Jerome (Jerome translated scripture into Latin) and during Pentecost itself, as recorded in the second chapter of Acts, where the arrival of the Spirit of Christ is evidenced in the speaking of many tongues. But Coombs' overarching purpose in making these points is to demonstrate that the artistically generative, vernacular worship praxis of megachurches can be interpreted as a locale of divinely ordained revival. To this end,

Coombs highlights Lim and Ruth's observation that, within megachurch contexts, worship itself becomes sacramental (though Coombs is uncomfortable with this non-vernacular label). Coombs locates the impetus for the Pentecostal sacramental view of worship in narratives of King David's temple in the Hebrew scriptures, where the Ark of the Covenant, as the tangible locale of God's presence amongst the Jewish people, is not hidden behind a veil; rather, it is directly in view—it is accessible. Contemporary megachurch worship, as an expression of revival, is similarly a locale for the real, transformative presence and action of an accessible God (pp. 18–19). As such it is both justified and in no need of justification.[30]

This is where a deep tension emerges in Coombs' argument. *God* here is what (and who) finally justifies megachurch worship praxis. God justifies megachurch worship as an expression of ordained revival, even as these need no justification because they *are* divinely ordained (that is, God is their source and origin). God is as much the premise here as the conclusion. Coombs can sense this circular reasoning, because in the introduction and conclusion to his argument, he makes clear that in the end, "mere analysis" (which "cheapens" experience) is not up to the task of proving his point (2022, p. 9, 19). Instead, he appeals to experience—to encounter—of the presence of God through contemporary megachurch worship itself. Despite Coombs' analysis of variables, God ends up playing the role of *deus ex machina.* Authentication then, rests on a God-given, transformative experience of revelation.[31] At the end of the day, logical modes of verification miss the point. Coombs is highly sceptical of how far analysis can go, when experience is the true mode of Christian encounter with God, and this is often facilitated through worship (note that this is also an epistemological claim—true knowledge of God is posited as experiential, and experience is implicitly separated here from thought). The act of faith is immune from the critique of logic because faith exists in a realm altogether different, where the same rules of logic don't apply—so it doesn't really matter whether Coombs' syllogisms hold up or not. Matters of faith cannot be interrogated in the way we approach empirical phenomena; this would be a category error. Coombs no doubt hopes that others arrive at a similar conclusion to him through their own experiential revelation. But Coombs' rhetorical strategy is not new in the history of Christian thought, and I would like to provide a

[30] One might wonder, if the Ark is a *typos* or type for Christ, why there is need to revert to a type prior to Christ in theologising Christian worship.
[31] This makes it very easy to accuse disagreeing interlocutors of not having been graced with divine insight.

(very small amount) of context so that, by considering where and why such strategies have been used before, we might be best equipped to think through the implications of Coombs' appeal.

Rethinking the wallpaper

Coombs' expression of faith is in keeping with the dynamics of the megachurch Pentecostal worship experience, where the revelation of God is central to what has become a sacramental space. Just as Coombs' argument stakes its claim on God, so megachurch worship itself (in the moment of its expression) tends to be experienced, interpreted and framed by its performers (that is, by worship leaders or ministers) as a locale and expression of divine presence.[32] No personal circumstance or individual experience can hold more weight than divine imprimatur for those who believe. If 'God says so', no more can be said. When an argument or experience is framed in this manner, it frames itself as revelatory whilst simultaneously framing any resistant position as a rejection of, or an assault on, God. Refutation can be framed as moral or religious failure—as disobedience, disrespect or a lack of faith. There is an implicit assumption here not only that a God's-eye-view exists, but that *one oneself* has the authority to verify that divine imprimatur—that is, to assume the accessibility of a God's-eye-view and assert this on God's behalf.

Coombs' very real application of the revelation/reason dichotomy should raise a variety of ethical (and deeply theological) questions. By holding ourselves and faith immune from logical critique – and by 'logical critique' I mean, holistic critical thought rather than legalistic rationalism or compartmentalised, unfeeling cerebralism – we risk ossification both in our self-growth and in the development of our social expressions … and worse. If we hold off reason and then interpret our own revelation (experiences) through the lens that 'God says so', this shapes a particular tonality of Christian culture where curiosity, questioning, difference and robust exploration may be heard as threatening. Coombs' argument should therefore give us pause to ask: What are the consequences – socially, relationally, phenomenologically – of making an argument that implies that megachurch worship is *unarguably* and *absolutely good* (that is, acceptable, right, important) because it is *of God*? What are the consequences

[32] I take this point as self-evident, whereby evidence is so profuse, especially online (since COVID-19 lockdowns) and within anecdotal experience that specific references would be arbitrary. I also realise that worship leaders and ministers may take exception to being labelled 'performers', but it is the clearest word in the context.

of dressing an absolute argument in the garb of a logical argument, while simultaneously decrying 'analytical thought', as Coombs does? What effects might such a methodology have on those who have contrasting experiences of megachurch worship to Coombs, or of Christian worship and faith generally? In other words, what are the consequences of this applied form of the revelation/reason dualism?

If the strength of an experience alone is the measure of its validity, or if the strength of an experience alone is perceived as the key to true interpretation of phenomena, then reasonable conversation may fade, individuals will clamour for increasingly intense experiences, and those who argue most forcefully for their own interpretation of events may suppress alternative perspectives. To invoke a "God's eye-view" can be a dangerous misuse of power that stifles freedom.[33] I am not saying that Coombs holds any such conscious intention; language use is cultural and accepted expressions become part of the wallpaper of existence, so that we habituate to them and no longer question their presence. But sometimes, the wallpaper needs changing.[34]

Echoes of Immanuel (Kant, that is …)

The Enlightenment has almost become a cliché point of reference in the history of ideas, and the nomination itself ('the Enlightenment') invariably oversimplifies and caricatures a rich and diverse history of human discovery in various geographical locations, cultures and disciplines. Nevertheless, it is accurate enough to describe the *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment, at least in part, as a historical movement of human thought constellations towards systematic and critical scientific discovery and reflection on the phenomenal world, away from superstition and authoritarian modes of knowledge promulgation.[35] The leaps in human understanding of the natural world through technological innovation, and the shifts in centres of power through political and social changes in Europe and the Americas through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, led to rethinking of diverse human and social phenomena. Ideas about religion and faith did not (and do not) occur in a vacuum but are interwoven with historical and cultural contexts, and developments in the ability to explain natural phenomena raised (and raises) myriad questions for theology and lived faith. Superstition was being demarcated from science, and questions of the nature and scope of human knowledge were as pertinent as ever.

[33] The "God's eye view" phrase is drawn from Bubbio, 2017.
[34] On language as 'wallpapering' existence, see Curkpatrick, 2001.
[35] See Kant's *An answer to the question, What is Enlightenment?* (2009).

If these new developments were accompanied by a euphoria over ‘reason’ and the human capacity for discovery and understanding, perhaps felt at times to be limitless, they also were accompanied by questions of the place of the human subject in its world, and indeed of the limits of human reason. For which domains was scientific discovery appropriate, and were there domains of human life and experience for which it was inadequate? Were there limits to human reason? How was knowledge related to perception, experience, feeling and the act of thought?

Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant saw that the burgeoning emphasis on human reason had implications for religious faith in general and Christian faith particularly. His work tempered the sense of the limitlessness of human reason through an exploration of the reasonable limits of reason in human knowledge, judgment and experience. Kant also wanted to know what, in human experience, was received from external sources, and what was brought by the human mind to experience *a priori*, or in other words, what existed ‘prior to experience’ as the *conditions of the possibility for experience* and shaped the way in which experience was received by the human subject (CPR 1999). What was the role of the perceiving, experiencing subject in holding together its ‘world’? Kant’s work suggested that human knowledge was not received ‘unfiltered’ from the world around it, but that each person was itself a filter or subject who received external stimuli and information from a world outside themselves, and that no pure access to this outside world was possible beyond interpretations of human consciousness.

This insight was essential for acknowledging the role of the human subject in their interpretation of the world, but it also raised questions about nihilistic self-enclosure. If I am stuck only in my own world of perception and interpretation, how can I know truth? How can I see things from another’s perspective? Is genuine relationality even possible? Is it possible to know the truth of anything in-itself if it resides ‘out there’, beyond me, inaccessible to me except from within the bounds of my own filters and perceptions? This was (and remains) a real conundrum for understanding knowledge of self, others and of God, and for relationality. Importantly, it might evoke the feeling that we, as human beings, *taint* the pure truth of things-in-themselves.

If for Kant, the truth of anything existed beyond human grasp, what did this mean for human apprehension of God as the source of all truth? Kant had a solution to this. While human beings could never access God or truth in-itself, they could however

recognise that it was essential to the good of humankind that God be postulated for the sake of practical morality (see Kant, 1998/2003, 2015). Postulates were to be held 'as if' true for practical purposes but could not be guaranteed by reason. Belief in God was a practical necessity, facilitating the moral functioning of individuals and society at large; God was a belief with practical implications, and the impetus for faith was a matter of duty.

Locating God beyond the grasp of human experience and beyond the realm of rational proof or certitude may seem like a massive blow to faith, and in a way it was. But it simultaneously offered a way of protecting faith from the incursions of reason and the methods of scientific discovery (Kant himself wrote, "I had to deny knowledge to make room for faith, see 1998, p. 117, Bxxx). How so? If God or truth or the realness of anything was beyond human grasp, then these things were also immune to the critique of human reason. Faith was in a realm of its own. "The very separation of knowable *appearances* from unknowable *things in themselves*," writes scholar Paul Redding, "had left a place for God, as well as for the soul, unassailed by the considerations of modern science" (2011, p. 49). The Absolute (God) was abyssally inaccessible to the subjectivity of humankind, which meant God was also inviolable. In a strange way, the assertion of human subjectivity had elevated and underscored the absoluteness and transcendency of the 'Absolute' (synonymously as truth or God, a concept further developed by the philosophers Fichte, Schelling and Hegel), while opening the possibility of 'absolute relativity' in human thought and experience.

For some, Kant bolstered religious agnosticism; for others, Kant's critique was an invitation to take refuge in faith. One contemporary of Kant's, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), perceived a critical incongruity in Kant's work in relation to faith. While Kant denied the human possibility for knowing anything in-itself, and thus effectively denied the existence of the in-itself for human reason, Jacobi pointed out that in doing so, Kant had in fact built his system on the presupposition *of* things-in-themselves (1994, p. 537–590). What Kant had denied, he also relied upon. Jacobi wrote,

> What divides me from the Kantian doctrine is only what divides it from itself too, and makes it incoherent, namely that, as we have shown earlier, it both presupposes and denies the existence of two specifically distinct sources of cognition in man's mind [that is, the finite and the divine]. It presupposes them implicitly and

> unbeknownst to itself. But it denies them explicitly, openly, and radically (1994, p. 550).

Jacobi agreed with Kant that faith did not belong in the realm of empiricism, but unlike Kant, he did not agree that humans lacked the capacity to access religious truths directly. Rather, he posited “immediate knowing” or feeling as the epistemological conduit for the knowledge of faith. He likened this faculty to a revelatory “spiritual eye” that complemented the “physical eye”, the latter attending to the world around us (1994, 569). He thus maintained a faith that was safe from the incursions of rationality or reason, because the things of faith as “immediate” or unmediated were of a different realm and rule to the things of reason.

The upshot?

Assertions along the lines of both Kant’s and Jacobi’s reasoning continue to present themselves within and beyond contemporary Christian discourses. Agnostics may propose holding onto what we know we know (reason, empirical phenomena) and leaving God in the sphere of the unknown, while perhaps adopting an instrumentalist-flavoured view that propounds faith in God for its positive ethico-social effects. Contemporary Protestants are more likely to separate experience of God from ‘human reason’, giving the former its own special domain, so that access to God is retained despite our subjective relativity (and perhaps our ‘fallen humanness’). This approach can also protect God from the incursions of reason (as per Coombs’ article). Does it also, however, lead to a strange apparent rupture between our reasoning and experiencing selves? *Strange and apparent*, because such an approach is in danger of carving us up in ways that are disingenuous, both in relation to human existence and to faith.

Take Coombs’ article for example. On the one hand, he utilises logic and reason to make an argument about the resemblances between megachurch worship and divinely inspired revivals; on the other hand, he believes that analytical thought will never lead to the sort of conviction that revelatory experience of megachurch worship will bring. Sounds Jacobian, doesn’t it? That is, the implication of Coombs’ approach is that we have two faculties—one for faith and one for reason, and the divinely inspired faculty of faith surpasses that of finite reason. Coombs is acting entirely consistently with this perspective: he is providing food for our rational stomachs and an invitation for our

spiritual stomachs (to transpose Jacobi's metaphor). But is this perspective true to human existence (in our place and time), and is it conducive to human flourishing?

When a 'God-says-so' argument is invoked, Kant's contribution to our awareness of located, human contextuality is ignored, even if his insights on human consciousness lay a groundwork for differentiating separate forms of knowledge (faith and reason). With such an argument, a Christian speaker implies that they themselves are privy to the ways of God (that is, one would have to know God's perspective to know what God thinks or says on any given topic). This latter elides the *difference* between the human rhetorician's position and the divine outlook and, while making God inviolable as inhabiting a wholly other epistemological zone, it completely eradicates Kant's insight that human knowledge is always contextual to the experience of being human. How then, might we think about truth? Must we choose between God's truth or no truth, and accept that knowledge is either revelatory *or* rational?

Reconciling reason and revelation

Not according to another German philosopher—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Responding both to Kant and Jacobi, Hegel believed that it was precisely in the capacity *to think* that human beings laid claim to that which made them distinctly human, and simultaneously to that which reflected the *imago Dei* (2007). *Faith and thought stem from the same root*, asserted Hegel—*this is what makes doubt so deeply painful* (2007, p. 39, 60). Hegel did not believe that knowledge of God was impossible ("God is not jealous," he declares—after all, why would God hide Godself when God expressly chooses to reveal Godself?) (2007, 67). But neither did Hegel believe that revelation of God was in any way distinct from the human capacity to *make sense of* life—that is, to reason, to think—and he asserted, like Kant, that all of thought is *mediated*. Feeling was not a sure judge of divine revelation, because truth and certainty were two different things; and truth had to be striven for, developed, shaped and made concrete so that it made a real difference in the lived experience of human beings, who were always shaped in communities.[36] Thus for Hegel, if faith is to be genuinely satisfied, reason must be genuinely satisfied too; we must make faith our own through thought. This is precisely where God-says-so arguments become problematic. Hegel writes:

[36] On truth versus certainty, see Hegel, 2007, p. 54–58. Also see Hegel, 2008, 2015.

> Everything spiritual is concrete; here we have before us the spiritual in its most profound aspect, namely spirit as the concreteness of faith and thought. These two are not only mixed in the most manifold fashion, immediately passing over from one to the other; they are also so inwardly bound together that there is no faith that does not contain within itself reflection, argumentation, or in fact, thought

Human beings seem to have an intractable inclination to *think* (though perhaps not always enough); the social and political implications of suppressing or compartmentalising reason can lead to an intense disconnect between the life of faith (Christian world) and the rest of life (secular world). In the latter, we rely on the discoveries of *reason* both in living generally as reasonable, clear-headed people, and in scientific endeavour—for example, in our reliance on health professionals and technology. But in the former, we aim to rely directly *on God* through experience; our trust in the secular realm can even be seen to undermine or compromise our trust in God. And so, painful tensions ensue when Christians are accused of living with double standards and try to prove their authenticity and faith by self-destructive measures—such as refusal of life-saving medical intervention, which takes this position to its extreme but logical conclusion. The tension that arises from this dualism is also visible in Christian apologists who desperately make use of logic and rhetoric to try and ‘prove’ their arguments, while working from a standpoint of faith which is apparently not related to logic in the first place.

The point of all this is to say that a stark divide between reason and revelation, where the latter is used as leverage against the former, is both disingenuous and unhelpful. Even when a statement of faith (as in Coombs’ article) is made, reason is entirely bound up with this argumentation; to suggest otherwise is disingenuous because it attempts to withhold itself from thoughtful critique. If God is the source of all truth, would not all revelation be, if not rational, then at least reasonable—if reason is that by which we make sense of the world? Human thought as inherently enmeshed with self-conscious awareness is implicated (in greater or lesser degrees) in all aspects of our existence and it cannot be separated from our human functioning without damage. We are always sensing and perceiving through the framework of our knowledge which is built on experience; thought dynamically binds this all together. There is much in our sub-conscious minds that has not made its way to conscious

awareness, but thought as self-conscious reflection can move us forward, beyond the sometimes unreasonable and destructive implicit beliefs that we carry with us without even realising it. Of course, reason on its own should not be idolised, and there is rationality that is misplaced; this then, is a reminder that reason is also entwined with maturity, and maturity with wisdom.

Recognitively wrapping up

I recognise that contemporary modes of Christian worship around the world have been a response to historical challenges, existential yearnings and cultural formations, and that these responses have held important functions to the people engaged in them. I therefore do not seek to denigrate or invalidate the positive experiences of those in such contexts; rather, in this article I have wanted to expand the dialogue to make space for those with contrasting experiences to that of Coombs'. But I not contesting Coombs' assertion that megachurch worship "should and must keep happening," even if I would frame the reasons for this in differing ways (Coombs, 2022, p. 9–10). I *am* saying that, as an existing social expression, megachurch worship will only *benefit* from critical reflective thought and the contribution of others with thoughtful, unthreatening but contrasting experiences. If such dialogue is shut down by anxiety as to the potential consequences of critical thought, with attitudes that pit 'reason' against 'revelation' in a manner that does not accord with the complexity of daily life, then 'God-says-so' arguments will undermine and stunt the very cultural expression (and the growth of those within it) that Coombs is eager to endorse. If megachurch practices are to evolve in a generative and life-giving manner, it is important for contrasting experiences to be given due consideration in their ongoing perpetuation. While hearing of these can be uncomfortable for those endorsing megachurch worship scenarios, such contrasting perspectives can, when heard, lead to positive strengthening and refinement of entrenched practices. It is important to consider in any space whether there is room for disagreement, and whether there is empathy for those who have alternative experiences or think differently. Absolute assertions should not be used to negate the possibility of individual difference, because individual difference is also shared (that is, what we share is our difference) and dialogue on this shared basis of respect can reshape social practices for the better, so that they are conducive to the flourishing of more people, more of the time.

I have attempted to show, by *thinking* through Coombs' mode of argument, that thought engaged with faith can be constructive and conducive to flourishing. Right where Coombs has sought to discredit analytical or critical thought, I have sought to apply it. The act of critical thinking need not diminish the value of experience as Coombs fears it might. Is it not rather by thoughtfully considering our experiences with sensitivity and insight that we honour them? This is how we integrate significant experiences into a wider whole of identity and make informed choices for the future. Further, it is a social and communal activity even as it is also deeply personal (Blunden, 2021).

At the end of the day, I suspect Coombs—like all of us—seeks positive recognition and validation in articulating experiences that have been moving and transformative in his own personal experience, as I do for my own experiences. He does not need to revert to absolutes for this to occur. Trying to secure the others' acceptance of our own perspective by reference to absolute authority (such as *God*) imposes upon others' freedom and dignity. Furthermore, life is complex and diverse, and others do not need to agree with us or have the same experiences as us for our own experiences to be valid—as affirming as it also is when we find the joy of sharing parallel experiences with others. Recognition and affirmation can only be given freely, as gift; some people will never give this to us, no matter how much we seek it from them. Others are more generous. My own experience of mega-church worship has been complex and painful, but this does not mean that Coombs' experience has not been positive and healing. I hope my intervention has expanded the dialogue and helped to bring out various hues that may otherwise have been glossed over. To give others space to work critically through our own assertions, and not to impose by invoking absolute arguments, is an expression of respect for the human dignity of others. In the context of Christian expression, and megachurch worship in particular, this should give us pause for thought concerning the interpretive framing and language that is used in the context of such expressions.

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