Education as Commodity or Formation?

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One of the best reasons for honoring Sonja Stewart is that her work for the formation of children as worshipers gives superb materials and an even more crucial model of ways to teach that oppose and thwart the North American cultural ethos of commodification.

That ethos stifles good education. Persons are trained by our society to look only for the right devices that produce the commodities they can consume. Everything becomes utilitarian. Education, especially, is deadened; curiosity and genuine formation are destroyed by glut.

Let's begin by examining more deeply the nature of our technological culture and the reasons that it is so deadly to genuine education. To do this, we will consider the analysis of Albert Borgmann, philosophy professor at the University of Montana in Missoula. He will enable us to comprehend more thoroughly the fundamental spirit of the technological milieu so that we can see more clearly the ways that Sonja Stewart's insights liberate us from its control. Borgmann's suggestions for reform, furthermore, will help us follow Stewart's model more adeptly for the sake of education in our churches.

The Technological Paradigm

We start our investigation with Borgmann's acknowledgment that our culture's problem is not technology per se, but its "device paradigm." Technology has taught us that everything should be immediately "available"—"instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy" (41).

Borgmann illustrates such availability by comparing the warmth produced in our homes a hundred or more years ago with the kind we can produce now. In an earlier age heat was not instantaneous because in the morning a fire first had to be built in the stove or the fireplace. And before it could be built, trees had to be felled, logs had to be sawed and split, the wood had to be hauled and stacked. Warmth was not ubiquitous because some rooms remained unheated, and none was heated evenly. The coaches and sleighs were not heated, nor were the boardwalks or all of the shops and stores. It was not entirely safe because one could get burned or set the house on fire. It was not easy because work, some skills, and attention were
constantly required to build and sustain a fire (41, emphasis mine).

We might think that we have made great progress in moving to increasingly better tools for heating our homes, but let’s consider what we lost as central air heating replaced the fireplace. Don’t think I want to return to the fireplace. I’m grateful for better warmth and fewer hazards. But we have lost many tasks and skills, relationships and social engagements, as we have “progressed” to newer methods of producing warmth.

The fireplace gave us much more than merely the commodity of heat. Included in its complexity were these gifts:

It was a focus, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a center. Its coldness marked the morning and the spreading of its warmth the beginning of the day. It assigned to the different family members tasks that defined their place in the household. The mother built the fire, the children kept the firebox filled, and the father cut the firewood. It provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and of carrying, the teaching of skills, and the fidelity to daily tasks (41-42).

What we must notice about the fireplace is that it gives meaning, it requires skills, and it creates various relationships. The hearth also endows family members with an entire world experienced through every bodily sensibility—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, feeling, thinking, imagining. Moreover,

That sensibility is sharpened and strengthened in skill. Skill is intensive and refined world engagement. Skill, in turn, is bound up with social engagement. It molds the person and gives the person character. Limitations of skill confine any one person’s primary engagement with the world to a small area. With the other areas one is mediately engaged through one’s acquaintance with the characteristic demeanor and habits of the practitioners of the other skills. That acquaintance is importantly enriched through one’s use of their products and the observation of their working (42).

We can understand more deeply what Borgmann means by engagement with all one’s bodily sensibilities when we look at children who have been formed by their education and practice for worship. Children who have received training and worship regularly have skills that are extremely refined, compared with those who experience worship rarely. Children who know the church year, as
taught in Sonja Stewart's book with Jerome Berryman, recognize the colors in the altar cloths, stoles, and/or banners used on a Sunday; they will associate the fragrance of Communion bread and wine with the Lord's Supper; they will have skills for praying, listening to the Word, participating in liturgies and hymns. Their bodies will understand the meaning of bowing, kneeling, standing, and sitting observantly. Their character will include traits of attentiveness, patience, reverence.

Let's return, then, to comparing a fireplace to present-day production of warmth by some sort of device. This is Borgmann's word for what has replaced earlier tools with their whole worlds of associated experiences and relationships and skills. In contrast to a hearth,

A device such as a central heating plant procures mere warmth and disburdens us of all other elements. These are taken over by the machinery of the device. The machinery makes no demands on our skill, strength, or attention, and it is less demanding the less it makes its presence felt (42).

Borgmann's emphasis that the machinery of a device removes from us any burdens and skills is important because the result is that we don't pay any attention to the device at all. We become interested only in the commodity that is produced or procured by it.

A commodity, then, is "what a device is there for." A furnace produces warmth; a cell phone, communication; a car, transportation; frozen food, a meal; a CD player, music (42). We don't understand how most of these things work—and we really don't want to have to find out.

If we look deeply at what Borgmann has underscored, we will see that his insights illuminate many troublesome aspects of contemporary life. Of course, I appreciate the warmth and ease of central heating, but I wonder if we have found other ways to replace the many other gifts that we lost when we displaced the fireplace's "world."

I must emphasize that I am not romanticizing the gifts I list; I am quite aware of the burdensome labor and adversity that these benefits meanwhile engendered. But let us ask how we have compensated or will try to compensate for the following treasures that have been displaced by central heating in Borgmann's example:

- chores for children, such as bringing in the wood;
- the responsibility of fulfilling these chores;
- the resultant self-discipline;
- accountability (such as experiencing cold) when the responsibility is not met;
- the rhythm of the day marked by morning's lighting of the fire, the gathering of the family in the evening by the fire, and the day's conclusion with the banking of the coals;
the possibility for a social fabric of intimacy through parents and children working side by side to produce the heat for their home;

the practice of adults mentoring their children in skills essential for living.

What sorts of engagements do we have in contemporary society to restore these riches?

Many church educators and parents lament their difficulty in earning respect from children who don’t seem to need them. Borgmann’s analysis helps us realize that one root of the problem is the cultural environment in which youngsters don’t really need adults to teach them skills essential for living (such as those necessary for heating the home with a fireplace—skills for felling trees, choosing the right ones, curing the wood, laying a fire). What natural opportunities exist these days for mentoring one’s descendants in ways that form the same fundamental bonds that were developed when children learned from their parents skills essential for basic survival? Computers, VCRs, and now DVDs seem to have reversed the mentoring, since children often master them faster and then instruct their parents.

This reversal of the mentoring process has enormous implications for Christian education, as families cease to be places in which children are trained in the faith. More and more tasks are turned over to the churches, and education becomes another commodity the family tries to purchase.

This situation is aggravated when technology takes over many of the tasks that families formerly shared, such as washing dishes or baking together, for these were optimal times to discuss faith matters. Moreover, small nuclear families released from onerous, intensive chores required for survival no longer need the help of extended households with grandparents and other relatives. Thus, shared tasks are even more curtailed and the consequent growing emptiness of family life leaves the parents bewildered and the children without guidance. Since less and less of vital significance remains entrusted to the family, the parents have ceased to embody rightful authority and a tradition of competence, and correspondingly there is less and less legitimate reason to hold children to any kind of discipline. Parental love is deprived of tangible and serious circumstances in which to realize itself (226).

This situation of diminished intimacy continues the chain of repercussions on Christian education, for children who lack social closeness in their families are often desperate for attention, undisciplined, even rebellious, and frequently unable to imagine a God who loves them profoundly.

Of course, these last symptoms are not unique to our times. Children in Sunday school have often been disobedient, even defiant—but the situation is amplified in our times by breakdowns in cultural morals, the hype of frenzied
advertising, the violence of visual media and games and even popular music, and the lack of genuine family relations.

Means and Ends

Before we turn to possible reforms, we must look at another major alteration in cultural life brought about by technological devices. Borgmann presents two changes important for our purposes here that devices provoke in the relationship of means and ends. First, multiple kinds of means (e.g., all sorts of heating devices or computers) produce the same ends (the commodities of warmth or word processing). Consequently, the market includes these competitive devices and thereby instigates, and supplies the possibilities to satisfy, the ongoing consumerist requirement of "upgrading" one's devices.

This multiplicity of means is apparent in the variety of types of Sunday school and catechumenal materials. In the public schools, districts are ceaselessly turning to new and "exciting" programs that promise much better results. Because quality is difficult to measure, success is often measured quantitatively.

Churches, too, start to base their assessments on numbers. Christian education and youth programs are judged by the numbers they draw, rather than by the development of faith, the formation of character, and training in practices.

The second change in the association of means and ends is closely related to the first—that we don't understand the means and, at the same time, find the ends so desirable (43-44) that we want, or think we need, more of the means/devices. If we have problems with them, we don't know how to fix them and wind up frustrated and anxious. In addition, because of what Borgmann calls the "social anonymity of the technological universe," we don't know the mechanics or repair workers personally, so we base our association with them entirely on money and signed contracts, rather than on trust and fidelity in the work. If, instead, the furnace builders and shopkeepers are members of our community, their skill and trustworthiness become more a matter of public knowledge. How many of us still experience in our environs a web of relations that knits the local community together and connects people in mutual responsibility, faithfulness, and honesty?

In churches, our culture's social anonymity manifests itself in several ways. For example, parishioners expect that pastors and Christian educators should be able to "fix" their children's morality. (After all, for what do we pay them?) Again, if our educational devices do not produce the kinds of commodities we expect (good children or the ability to spout proper Christian answers), we simply try another set of means, a different "program" for Christian education. Also, moving children progressively through different Sunday school rooms and teachers is vastly different from spiritual formation through an entire community of several loving adults who continually mentor children throughout all the congregation's gatherings and even in the neighborhood.
The Device Paradigm and Christian Education

The examples above sketch some of the ways that the technological society influences education, but, more important, we must recognize how as an undergirding pattern the device paradigm infects many aspects of the consumer society and, consequently, of our churches. One obvious example that affected my husband’s career as a public elementary school teacher was the national reliance on achievement tests to assess both students and schools. Some school districts eliminate training in music and other arts from their curricula, since those aren’t useful devices for generating the commodity of passing grades on the exams. If teachers begin merely “teaching to the test,” the classroom becomes solely a device to produce the commodity of proficiency and can no longer be a community in which teachers and students engage in the practice of learning through relationship with each other.

I don’t mean that students should not be required to attain certain skills and master specific knowledge. Some sort of evaluation is needed to ascertain their level of proficiency. However, if the commodity of test results is the only—or even the primary—goal, then education becomes merely a device and the students merely consumers.

Might the lack of student curiosity which university and seminary professors have sometimes mentioned be due to such commodification? Indeed, the device paradigm endangers true learning, stiles eager inquisitiveness, and usurps the delight of discovery, when its ethos replaces these with the fetters of a test that ignores multiple kinds of intelligence or with the utilitarian goal of securing a high-paying job (for which the university is merely the device).

The same thing happens in churches if catechumenal training becomes commodified by the mind-set that youth will thereby be prepared to “graduate” from Christian education when they are confirmed. Sunday school lesson plans become commodified, too, if the goal is merely to convey biblical stories or truths so that students can play back the content.

Borgmann offers a beneficial distinction between distraction and engagement (51) which can help us avoid commodifying Christian education. When students in our classes have problems, do we see them as distractions from our goal to “finish the lesson” or do we recognize in them an opportunity to engage with the student in explorations of faith or trust? Does the situation compel us to become more deeply immersed in our relationship with the student?

This distinction between distraction and engagement is also very helpful for enabling us to know whether and when to make use of technological devices in Christian education. Do those tools deepen our engagement with the community of learners or do they distract us from it? That question should be especially asked of those who frequently use videos for educational purposes in churches. It seems to me that children (and adults) in our parishes don’t need more screens. Rather, they need lived experiences with mature Christians. They need trustworthy modeling of the Christian life by faithful people. They need genuine
conversations about critical issues in church and society with thoughtful and wise believers.

In general, we can’t do much about our surrounding society’s immersion in, and fascination with, the technological milieu and its advances. However, Borgmann insists, in many aspects of our lives (and, we can add, our churches) we are able to make positive choices for engagement rather than distraction. When we do make such decisions, we protest and even limit technology’s rule, rather than confirm it (104).

Some examples of choices for engagement in our daily life include patronizing a local theater group, purchasing our piano from and having it tuned by blind craftsmen, and buying our fruit from nearby orchardists. In our churches we could use pottery crafted by, flowers grown in the yards of, furniture carved by, and artworks designed and produced together with, community members. When these enhance our worship setting, we become more deeply encompassed by a sense of the whole body of Christ.

Since the major problem is not technology per se, but that its device paradigm has become the primary, though usually inconspicuous, pattern by which much of our society operates (105), the key question is how in our church communities and educational processes we can always maintain discernment so that we make use of the opportunities in which we can choose engagement. Sonja Stewart is a tremendous model for that, for her work on young children and worship enables children constantly to be engaged in actual worship by participating in liturgical responses, songs, biblical texts, prayers, blessings.

The benefits of choices for engagement are illustrated well by the differences if parents buy their child a CD player and three CDs or rent a violin and pay for lessons. The first choice provides only a device that produces the commodity of music. As such, it will inevitably demand the purchase of more discs when the musical commodities of the first CDs begin to get “boring.” In contrast, if parents introduce their child instead to genuine engagement with music, they will thereby introduce her to an entire world of relationships with teachers, fellow students, orchestra members, model performers, composers, and with endless possibilities for music to play and ceaseless opportunities to express her own creativity.

Sadly, parents typically make the first choice because it is a “quick fix,” which is precisely why the device paradigm is such a dangerous pattern for our society. Since a quick fix is easy, most parents and children prefer it, but it does not issue in lasting engagement. The child needs little parental involvement; with one simple lesson in how to start the system the child can be easily entertained—for a while.

Contrarily, if the child takes music lessons, both parents and child will need great patience during the initial months (years?) of shrill sounds and protests over practicing. Both might have to endure many student recitals; both might rejoice in professional concerts that expose the child to superb playing and stimulate patience for continuing. If the child has not had sufficient experiences
in which diligent work eventually "pays off," however, such patience might not even be possible. Nevertheless, the patient process of endurance, of struggle and learning, and of acquiring the disciplines of listening, practicing, performing, and relating to the musical world is certainly worth it, for it forms the child's character, and, in turn, her character affects other dimensions of her life.

The same is especially true in Christian education. Instead of using technological tools—like back-up tapes for singing—let's invest in community members. Perhaps a congregation can pay for music lessons so that promising youth in the parish can accompany the singing of younger children. Similarly, far more beneficial for forming faith is a loving believer who simply shares his insights and relationship with God, even if he might not speak outstandingly, than a video that can't engage the students in friendship.

For another crucial reason, churches should remain alert for opportunities to make choices that reduce the control of the device paradigm. Borgmann points out the inextricable connection between technology's rule and world economic inequality (112). Why do churches spend enormous amounts of money on technology for educational programs or worship services when forty thousand people die each day of hunger and malnutrition-related diseases? Do videos and multi-media help worshipers engage more thoroughly in their relationship with God?

Oftentimes the opposite is the case: the speed of multimedia entertainment prevents such engagement. As David Stewart of Princeton concludes, "The wired environment is almost intrinsically impatient, and so doesn't always foster quiet, reflection and deliberation—the low-anxiety cast of mind which often produces the best thinking about God." Is it good stewardship for churches to spend major resources on high-tech worship/educational programs and hyped excitement, which aren't vitally conducive to deliberate thinking about, and encounter with, God, when so many people live—and die—without adequate food or shelter?

It is pressing, therefore, that we understand the technological society's device paradigm and its subtle attractions—which lead us into idolatries of devices and the commodities they produce—if we want faithfully to work for justice in the world, as well as if we want to educate our youth (and adults) by means of genuine engagement instead of mere entertainment.

**How Does the Device Paradigm Harm Christian Education?**

Borgmann's descriptions of the technological society's paradigm make it clear that many dimensions of our lives have been reduced to "devices producing commodities," with the result that our abilities to be truly engaged in life are limited.

This adversely affects the children who participate in Christian education opportunities. A high proportion of them have not engaged much in social practices that develop their ability to receive and express intimacy. They have
not baked cookies or worked on chores together in their families. I do not romantically claim that in the past good intimacy was always created by shared tasks and pleasures, but at least a social fabric less dominated by technological gadgets and entertainments gave space and time for healthy engagement in necessary relational work, communal leisure activities, or shared silence.

Borgmann’s paradigm also helps us understand the almost inescapable correlation of technological advance, media hype, and consumption. We can hardly escape advertising’s influence, since it’s so intricately interwoven with the fundamental fabric of society. Consequently, many families become strangled economically. The device paradigm’s control makes them susceptible to the infections of advertising and the tangle of needs (1) to earn enough money to give their children technological advantages, (2) for novelty to replace engagement in order to escape the demands or boredom of work, and (3) for an endless accumulation of consumer gadgets to save time.

Consider, for example, parents treated as devices at work by expectations of a certain level of production of commodities, whether objects or ideas, reports or sales. To reach the quota requires increasingly longer hours or more intense labor, which often leads to less time with their children. They can’t afford to resign and find less demanding work; they often need the money to buy timesaving gadgets or to entertain their children for whom they have little time. The entangling cycle seems inescapable. The result to the church is less time for intimacy and faith sharing with their children, less time for participation in the parish’s gatherings, less money for the needs of the impoverished world.

Sometimes pastors and church educators find themselves caught in the same sort of nasty spirals. Under false expectations for the kinds and amounts of commodities they should produce, they become devices who invest their time in multiple projects that actually take them away from genuine engagement in faith building through relationships with church members.

The device paradigm thereby produces a wide variety of kinds of violence—not only against the poor, as we who are rich devote more and more of our resources to our own technological advancements, entertainments, and accumulations, rather than to remedies for poverty, but also against ourselves as we become ensnared in the way of life the technological milieu fosters. Many in our churches display the despair of the hopelessly enmeshed.

How much better if all the congregational members could understand the technological paradigm and how it traps us. If we perceive it clearly, we could escape its clutches, restrict its control, and return again to what really matters in life and in the community of faith!

Remember: I’m not averse to technology that genuinely liberates us from arduous tasks. However, as Borgmann observes, over time “liberation has gradually given way to disengagement, and distraction has displaced enrichment.” Hard work is increasingly “degraded and disliked” (118)—in daily life and, as a result, in Christian worship and education.
We must learn to distinguish between genuine liberation from unworthy labor and disengagement. As Daniel Boorstin clarifies, the biblical Rebecca might not have been freed from the drudgery of carrying water by advanced plumbing systems, yet, when she went to the well, she acquired not only water, but also friendship, the village news, and a husband. Because in a technological milieu we look at work as merely the means to an end, we don’t notice how much we might lose culturally and socially when we are “liberated” from it.

This distinction has enormous implications for churches. Do we invest in educating members for the sake of worship skills? How much do we devalue the work involved in learning to read the Bible wisely? What do we lose when community dinners are catered and lawn care or building upkeep hired out, instead of making common meals, landscaping, and general cleaning shared tasks? What educational, faith-and-life sharing opportunities are our children missing because we don’t work together on such projects across generational lines?

Our society’s immense need to be entertained (technological boredom must be kept at bay!) derives from this situation that we have been trained to seek only the final product, the commodity, rather than to value the process of work, which has instead become merely the device. Consequently, many people are simply not in the habit of becoming engaged in any activities other than consumptive ones. We see this most often in worship when participants want only the commodity of being “uplifted” and thus are bored by the work of worship. The best enjoyment in worship, rather, comes from active participation in the process, in the engagement with God, in the practice of worship skills.

Moreover, we become voyeurs (like people who watch history or nature programs on television but don’t seriously understand history or become engaged in conserving nature), rather than genuine participants in the practices of faith. No wonder Christianity seems to be having so little impact on our society. Sonja Stewart doesn’t let children (and the adults who teach them) become mere observers. Her lesson plans are not designed for teachers to talk at the children, but for them all to participate together in earnest worship.

Not only do I fervently advocate the kind of education she fashions, but also I believe that educators and church leaders should be stronger in helping parents recognize how destructive electronic entertainments are for their children, especially for their faith formation. As Borgmann asserts, the problem with television (which we could extend to other forms of media) is not so much the specifics of programming, but that it tends “to prevent an idyllic childhood and a vigorous adolescence, to suffocate conversation, reduce common meals, supersede reading, to crowd out games, walks, and social occasions. And this irresistible displacement effect rests in turn on the incredible attractiveness” of the media, which thereby become addictive. In the church, do we want our children’s childhood to be stolen by electronic media?

As I teach throughout the church, I meet many families who, like ours, don’t have televisions. None of us regrets it. Though to suggest that church members
discard or restrict television might seem excessively demanding, it is actually not enough! It is more urgent that we impede the larger pattern of technological consumption, reform the entire device paradigm, and combat the ways in which it controls us.

**How Can Churches and their Members Break Free?**

The problem in our society and, grievously, in our churches is not the commodities, nor the technological devices that produce them. The problem is the device paradigm, which causes technology to move beyond its proper vocation and thereby instills fundamental attitudes that twist us away from engagement in practices that relate to what is most important to us. Thereby our society is marked by a proliferation of devices generating a constant flood of commodities unrelated to any context and robbing from consumers webs of relationships. To counteract this, let's reform the paradigm and the theology that accompanies it.

We begin to limit technology (and its paradigm) by employing it only in relation to what is central in our lives (168). Borgmann uses the expression *focal concerns* for those central dimensions of life in which we are most deeply engaged. If what we do is focused on what is primary, technology and its commodifications will no longer be the customary, dominant way in which we view reality—if we recognize and restrain the paradigm (220). We do this by means of genuine engagement in practices that require “the acquisition of skills, the fidelity to a daily discipline, the broadening of sensibility, the profound interaction of human beings, and the preservation and development of tradition” (214). Sonja Stewart’s books on children and worship counteract the device paradigm brilliantly (though she doesn’t use this language). She does this by submitting everything to the focal concern of engaging children in actual worship.

**By What Steps Can We Begin to Reform the Technological Milieu?**

Borgmann specifies three steps by which giving priority to our focal commitments restrains technology and its paradigm: clearing space for our focal concern, simplifying its context, and expanding the same engagement to extended areas of our lives (220-222). To illustrate the first step Borgmann describes the way artistic chefs develop the space, time, and skills for “the culture of the table.” A good chef uses certain technologies that heighten fragrances and flavors but rejects those, such as prepackaged food commodities, that hinder the diners’ enjoyment of the freshness of ingredients and the chef’s creativity in presenting them.

Sonja Stewart’s designs for children and worship clear space for her focal concern by urging teachers to come early and become engaged in worship before the children arrive. Then she calls for a separate greeter to usher the children into
the worship space already inhabited by the teacher and into the worship practice in which the teacher is already immersed. This method truly restricts the device paradigm. The frenzy of Sunday mornings is cleared away from the worship space and time; the teacher can concentrate solely on inviting the children into the worship in which she is already engaged. Then the teacher mentors the children by every word she speaks and every action she demonstrates. Everything is designed to welcome the children into God’s presence.

The second step for reform is to simplify the surrounding context of our focal concern so that everything in it can truly support the focus. Once we have truly cleared a space for focal things and practices, all commodities are returned to their proper role in the background (as means to serve the focal ends). In this step we carefully ask about everything: for what end is it a means? This requires great skills of discernment so that we eliminate whatever clutters up the context and thereby doesn’t really support our focal concerns.

Sonja Stewart simplifies the context for her focus on worship by urging congregations to make enough figures for the biblical stories so that each lesson has its own set of needed materials. That way, worship is never disrupted by a search for materials necessary for telling the day’s story or engaging in its worship practices.

Furthermore, all the materials in the room are focused on worship. Stewart develops this step by the way she organizes the classroom for her designs. Trays and baskets, a particular arrangement of shelves, and the worship table all contribute to an order that enables teachers and children to focus entirely on engaging in actual worship. All the various accoutrements in the room find their place totally in relationship to this central focus, and nothing extra clutters the space and time.

Other aspects of Stewart’s instructions keep the materials used from being commodified. She teaches us to treat all the objects with worshipful respect; each figure or flannel piece or candle contributes to telling a story or welcoming us into a Christian practice that deepens our worship and relationship with God. Backdrops and symbols, colors and representations of biblical persons are not merely utilitarian, but are part of a larger liturgy of greeting, songs, biblical readings, prayers, and benedictions given personally to each child.

Borgmann’s final reforming step unfolds what we gain in the first two into other areas of life. The more we manage to clear space for focal concerns (our true ends) and then are enabled to limit technology and consumerist products to their proper place in the background (as means), the more we will long to extend the sphere of engagement as far as possible.

In Stewart’s proposals for children and worship, the more teachers and students experience the Sunday morning event in all the fullness and depth of genuine worship (as opposed to various devices for entertaining children) and the more they discover the delight of their own fully embodied competence in relation to that worship priority, the more they will want to experience the same excellence in other areas of their lives. The focal concern of worship will
become more incorporated into every life dimension—how we spend our time, our money, our energy, our love. All our practices become more centered in adoration of God.

That is why worship is the best focal concern we could choose for dealing with children. Indeed, the goal of the entire church is to move away from the selfishness and destructiveness and inequities of our culture into lives of genuine worship in every aspect and moment of time.

Not only is the focal concern of worship spread more thoroughly throughout the lives of teachers and students by Stewart’s designs. Also, this more cohesive way of combating the device/commodity paradigm spreads throughout the congregation. Because preparation of the classrooms and the worship materials no doubt requires an enormous number of the congregation’s people and a great diversity of gifts, her “Children and Worship” plans develop commitment on the part of the whole community and teach everyone the importance of worship. In the process, regular congregational worshipers are divested of the false idea that worship is the device to produce the commodity of our own good feelings. The love of God and of the neighbors can become more thoroughly the truly Christian focal concerns of the church.

Sonja Stewart’s superb work with children and worship undergirds my sense that we are at a crucial time in our churches. Will we teach our children truly to worship or will we allow them to become enwrapped in our society’s commodifications? I believe it is of the utmost urgency that church leaders and parishioners understand the device paradigm undergirding our technological milieu and its consumerism and learn to discern when it is taking our church life away from Christian focal concerns. Can we learn, in opposition to its power, to clear a space for our focal commitments, simplify our focal contexts, and extend our focus on worship to every dimension of our lives?

What truly are our focal concerns in daily and church life? Are they worthy of our commitment? Only the Trinity can free us from our bondage to the device paradigm and the commodifications of our culture. Is everything in our lives focused on worshiping the true God?

ENDNOTES

1 In this article I am working especially with Sonja M. Stewart and Jerome W. Berryman, Young Children and Worship (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) and Sonja Stewart, Following Jesus: More about Young Children and Worship (Louisville, Geneva Press, 2000). I realize that these books are a small fraction of her great legacy to the church in teaching and writing, but these two volumes illustrate exceptionally well the kind of opposition to the technological society’s device paradigm that is urgently needed by our churches.

2 Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 38. Page references to this book throughout this article will be given parenthetically in the text. For a more thorough discussion of Borgmann’s analysis, see chapter 2, “Why Does the


5 For a deeper discussion of these issues, see Marva J. Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).


7 Chapter 4 of *Unfettered Hope* shows many ways in which churches fail to live according to their focal concerns, whereas chapter 5 explores the Scriptures to elucidate the specific focal concerns of the Christian community and how those concerns can enable us to become the kind of community that passes on the faith to our children, illuminates for the world the Trinity’s grace and goodness, and responds more generously to global economic needs. Chapter 6 then identifies seventy practices by which Christians live in accordance with biblical focal concerns.

8 For further discussion on the importance of keeping the love of God and the love of the neighbors the focal concerns of worship, see Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); *A Royal ‘Waste’ of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); and *How Shall We Worship:: Biblical Guidance for the Worship Wars* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2003).