

Book Reviews

Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital StoryTellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002). Reviewed by Margaret Leinbach.

Wilson and Moore critique both traditional mainline Protestant worship and late 20th century evangelical worship through the lens of the Gen X and Millennium “digital” generations. They tell us why our congregations are not attracting these young adults, and what we need to have in our worship services to attract them.

The authors’ generation is dissatisfied with the modern mindset found in their parents’ and grandparents’ congregations because that mindset focuses on objective empirical knowledge as the source of all truth. Gen X and Millennials are “postmoderns” who turn away from the church of their childhood because these churches are still trying to communicate the faith in a modern context—through facts and objective empirical knowledge.

People today now yearn for wonder and mystery, and per the authors, “Modernity kills wonder and mystery.” Also in a modern mindset, the reason to communicate is to pass along information, thus the purpose of technology in worship in a modern mindset is to enhance presentation of sermon points, words to hymns etc.

The authors criticize mainline protestant churches for being “in high culture” not willing to alter or sacrifice their dominant culture identity for the sake of the gospel. By judging some forms of communication as holy, the implication is other

forms of communication are not. The authors assert that art (particularly pictures and hymns) of older cultures draw us not to the subject it represents, but instead to that cultural form. Or said another way, the meaning is lost in the form of the message, with form taking precedent over the substance. For example stain glass once served a powerful role in communicating the gospel story — now it is merely an expensive ornament. “Images and metaphors die when they lose their power to shock us into seeing things a new way.” Hence the complaint that mainline worship is “boring.”

Their criticism for evangelical worship is its emphasis on technical “performance,” passive pew sitters, and weak engagement with the biblical story. In many evangelical churches there is very little Bible present in worship, and if scripture is present, it’s only an exposition on a brief passage, usually an epistle, Old Testament prophet, or psalm. Too many evangelical churches use the Bible as an instruction manual for life instead of using the Bible as “...rich, inspired heritage of stories of God’s movement of love in, to, and through created people...”

The authors remind us that good worship connects people to what God has done, and continues to do for us, so that we may understand and experience the love of God. Yahweh was, and still is, different from other gods in that Yahweh is a God who wants covenant relationship with

people. They assert the best way to connect people to God in worship is through story. “The goal of worship... is to tell the story of the risen Lord and through it to glorify God through proclamation, prayer, and presence, and because of it, to edify each other as the community of Christ.” Stories, not doctrine, form belief. To love God with our heart and soul comes through stories — not just our minds. “Faith in Jesus is about relationship, and the best way to understand that relationship is through the telling and retelling of stories.”

To tell the stories of faith meaningfully, we must adapt to the current culture. The video screen has the potential to be today’s stain glass, a way to use technology to communicate thoughts, ideas, and feelings that touch the heart of worshippers. Art is one of the primary means through which we can encounter God. (Remember Zinzendorf’s life changing experience upon seeing Domenico Feti’s *Ecco Homo?*).

“Art tells stories; it doesn’t make points, and is at its most powerful when it narrates rather than ornaments.” Art can remind us of what is real by stripping away the falsehoods that cloud our lives, and showing us reflections of God in the world. “Through art on the screen, digital worship can recapture the emotive power of wonder and awe of God and the majesty of creation.”

Thus, worship that reaches younger adults focuses on telling the stories of faith in ways that help us detach from our daily lives and see connections and identify archetypes that apply not simply to the story’s characters, but to us and people we know. To do this worship planners and leaders must become “masters of multiple communication forms” in sharing the stories of our faith. We must also update metaphors so that

biblical stories written in the first century can be understood and internalized in the 21st century. “Word of God,” “burning bush,” “mustard seed,” Holy Spirit represented as a dove — most of Jesus teaches about faith are conveyed through stories and metaphors, and we must find fresh ways to communicate them to the digital generation.

With a change in mindset from modern to postmodern, technology’s purpose in worship changes from an information tool to a catalyst for communal experience. A “digital mindset” for worship is: true stories, grounded in faith and scripture, presented as Jesus did, in the form of a visual parable. A short video clip, a live reading accompanied by music and a series of graphics, a segment from a film — “all woven together to communicate a single central theme based on Jesus parables on the deep human needs of people in the streets, who have come for an experience of God.”

In a digital mindset, film clips in worship move from being sermon illustrations and teaching tools, to evoking a shared experience and a metaphor that captures the essence of a story. There is a move away from spectator worship to participatory worship where worshippers have the possibility to experience Christ at a deeper level. Worship leaders “encourage an atmosphere of participatory response, whether it is via paraverbals, laughter, applause, or spoken word.”

The book also includes a DVD with several worship clips created by the authors and used in worship. Unfortunately for this aging Baby Boomer, the clips were mediocre home movies whose meaning often wasn’t clear to me. I wholeheartily agree with the authors’ emphasis on

proclaiming the stories of the bible and how the biblical stories intersect with the stories of our lives. THE STORY of the God of Israel (with the story of Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical key) as revealed in scripture should be the interpretive framework within which we live our lives and understand reality. In worship the unchanging

words of scripture ought to be in dialogue with our life stories in ways that deepen our appreciation for the gifts God has given us that calls forth our repentance, praise, and our trust in divine providence. And that is discipleship making worship for all generations.

Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskeep, *Chasing Down a Rumor: The Death of Mainline Denominations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005). Reviewed by Craig Atwood.

For nearly 20 years books, articles, and on-line discussion groups have gleefully promoted the idea that the mainline denominations are dinosaurs doomed to extinction while “post-modern” mega-churches are the wave of the future. Though much of this literature is merely a form of advertising in the religious marketplace, it has often been accepted at face value by leaders in the mainline churches themselves. The imminent death of the mainline churches is the “rumor” that Bacher and Inskeep chase down in this helpful little book. They begin by offering solid evidence that the death of the mainline churches has been exaggerated..

The authors are rightly concerned that the death of the mainline churches will become a self-fulfilling prophecy as churches lose confidence and commitment to their mission. They note that most of the proposals for new types of religious institutions, such as an “apostolic” model of networked congregations, are not at all new. They are part of the historic fabric of American Protestantism, which has always been

more interested in heart-felt personal religiosity than institutional structures. What was genuinely new in 20th century religion, according to Bacher and Inskeep, was the development of large, bureaucratic denominational organizations dedicated to building a just society. Rather than abandon this mission, the mainline churches are urged to learn from their mistakes and move forward. What the book fails to acknowledge about this liberal mission is that it always marred by paternalism and elitism.

The authors contrast the mainline churches’ commitment to community and the evangelical focus on personal religion. They offer Reinhold Niebuhr and Norman Vincent Peale as exemplars of each approach. This is oversimplification is at least as great as those criticized by the authors. It was the mainline churches that first embraced Peale’s “power of positive thinking.” Robert Schuller is a pastor in a mainline church (RCA), after all. It was also the mainline churches that redefined pastoral care in terms of therapeutic conversation in the 1950s and 60s. Also, despite