

## Theater Church

### Spectacles, Stories and Diminishing Scripture

**"And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play'." (1 Corinthians 10:7, NKJV)**

"Believers, Beware!" *EXODUS THIRTY-TWO* may soon be coming to a theater-church near you!

Remember when after exiting Egypt, as Moses received the Law from God on Mt. Sinai *above*, the nation of Israel partied and worshipped a false god in the camp *below*? Forgetting how Jehovah had redeemed them from captivity by working signs and wonders on their behalf, the people demanded of Aaron:

**Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.**  
(Exodus 32:1, NASB)

The idolaters, it seems, could not stand to wait (boring!!!) in faith for Moses to come down to them. They needed something contemporary, something visual, something sensual, something fresh. So finding himself to be an accommodating user-friendly and seeker-sensitive leader, Aaron caved in the crowd's demands. They needed gods they could see and touch, and above all else, "feel." So Aaron called for donations. The people, mostly women and children, brought him their "sacrifices of praise." After smelting the jewelry, Aaron fashioned an idol. Magically he later explained to Moses, the calf just jumped out of the fire (See Exodus 32:24.). Then, as High Priest, Aaron called for a celebration of praise to be held the next day to honor their new golden bull of a god. That's the kind of worship that happened in the wilderness (emphasis upon "wild" in *wilderness*) then; and that's kind of worship occurring in the church of "what's-happening-now."

#### Simulating Sinai

In the celebration to honor Israel's new god, and being the accommodating leader that he was, we can envision that Aaron, were he in charge of a contemporary congregation, would have called for the formation of a *worship team* (drummer, lead singer(s) and guitarists), ordered the *electrical crew* to ready the "sanctuary" with the newest audio-visual equipment (multiple giant screens on which to project a fast paced collage of images) and advised *the sound techs* to coordinate the flashing strobe lights with the pulse of the drum beat and to time the release a fireworks display that would hiss, flash, pop and belch forth smoke as the worship of the congregants was driven to a frenzied climax. We can imagine all of this, and more, could be employed to stimulate worshippers to enter into the story of Israel's Sinai experience (See Exodus 19:18-19; Exodus 32:17-18.).

**"Kicking it up a notch!"**

But to what has become a tired and predictable way of doing contemporary church, an even more entertaining way has been proposed. To use the words of a cable TV comedian-chef, *The Church of the Story*, now desires to "kick-up a notch" the recipe for doing worship, to add more "bam" to the worship experience.

Believing that the way most pastors communicate the gospel is too "mummified," one young emerging ex-pastor assembled a cast and crew to present to audiences of church leaders and workers what he calls *Story*. Note: the title is not *The Story*, but just *Story*. *Story* is just one of many ongoing spiritual *narratives below* that contribute to the grand *metanarrative above*. As a compound word (the Greek preposition *meta* plus narrative), metanarrative is "a learned borrowing from Greek meaning 'after,' 'along with,' 'beyond,' 'among,' 'behind,' and often denoting change . . ."[1] A key idea in defining the word metanarrative is "change." But just what is *Story*?

To the emerging church, it's all about synthesizing a *story below* to somehow intuit and enter into what is believed to be the evolving *story above*. The narrative on earth (i.e., story) influences how the metanarrative above (i.e., *The Story*) is to be understood. The comprehensible experiences engendered by worship below (i.e., story) are thought to mystically contribute to imagining the incomprehensible story above, the metanarrative. As one emerging pastor states, "story-telling, along with passion, is greatly lacking in churches and ministry today." [2] Inspired by the imaginary tales of C.S. Lewis, emerging ex-pastor Ben Arment remarked of his version of *Story*, that,

I believe in the power of stories. Stories captivate us. They awaken our hearts and release our imaginations. [3]

So he assembled a number of "master" communicators to one stage for what he called a "theatrical conference experience." In its debut, *Story*, in addition to the master communicators, featured,

music, drama, comedy and interactive exchanges with attendees. The goal is to create a place where Gospel communicators can be inspired to be better and more effective at what they do. [4]

Arment explains, "We're setting it in the context of a theatrical environment to play up the storytelling elements of the Gospel to make it more exciting, more appealing and draw out the essence of what our story is . . . think of it as a dinner theater." [5] The "theater" approach to doing church raises questions regarding both the means and the message whereby "faith" is communicated.

### **The Means**

Arment stated that, "I think communicators largely have lost the imaginative qualities of the Gospel." [6] When taken to the excess, human imagination can become spiritually dangerous. Imagination becomes the inspiration for innovation which by the creation of "image," can easily

lead to idolatry. As Paul explains the devolution into pagan idolatry,

**Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their *imaginings*, and their foolish heart was darkened. . . . [and they] changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an *image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four footed beasts, and creeping things*. (Emphasis mine, Romans 1:21, 23, KJV)**

It is exactly at this point that theater-church, which entertains through the creation of a sensual spectacle involving music, drama, art, lights, comedy, candles and whatever else can be imagined in this digital world, enters the realm of idolatry because these mechanisms employed for the purpose of inducing worship are an affront to the type of worship the Father seeks. As Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman, "**But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers**" (John 4:23). As Hunt warns regarding the lapse into idolatry:

Having left the God as revealed in nature and conscience [and Holy Scripture], one is left with his own imagination to recast God as he pleases. People worship the God of their own mind. The rejecter moves away from light and into darkness. At this stage a person is not searching for God, groping for Him as it were, but rather creating a worldview in which to live so that the weight of guilt does not have to be felt. [7]

To guard against idolatry's intrusion into the national life of ancient Israel, the Lord gave the first and second of the Ten Commandments to the nation-- "**Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth . . .**" (Exodus 20:3-4). To discourage human creativity from leading to idolatry, the Lord specified exactly what would be allowed in the construction of the Tabernacle to honor His name and the place of His Shekinah presence (Exodus 26:1 ff.). Presumably, His exact specifications reflect that human creativity, given the depraved "wants" of the human heart, can easily fall into idolatry. This explains why altars were to be built with uncut (no art work on them) stones--"**And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it**" (Exodus 20:25, NKJV). As Paul told the Athenian philosophers, "**Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man**" (Acts 17:29). Herein lies the danger for theater-church.

### The Message

The name of the production is *Story*. The ex-pastor and now producer implies that *Story* is a continuing part of a greater metanarrative. The relationship of *Story* to the emerging church's evolving metanarrative of spirituality, and the implications of it for the authority of Holy Scripture in the church, needs clarification.

To emergents, the Bible is viewed as a compilation of various individuals' experiences with God.

These story-narratives form part of a greater story that exists beyond human comprehension, the metanarrative. In and by itself, the Bible is not The Story, or metanarrative, though it does indicate how people in the past have contributed to it. The metanarrative lies above and beyond the Bible. Thus the stories in the Bible serve as invitations for readers to in a fresh way cultivate their developing spiritual narrative with God by identifying with the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Ruth, David, Solomon, Esther and the prophets. In the aggregate, all of us together, whether an ancient biblical character or a modern Christian, contribute to God's evolving and expanding metanarrative. Though they might, individual stories don't necessarily have meaning in isolation from the stories of others. So people from all faith groups--animist, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, etc.--are invited and encouraged to compare notes as to the creative and innovative ways in which God works in their lives, all of which contribute to the metanarrative. As Eugene Peterson says,

We want a spirituality that is world-embracing, all-experience-encompassing. Our sense of life is huge--we are in touch with Asians and Africans and Slavs, with Native Americans and South Americans. We are finding out about the remarkable spiritualities in Australian bush aborigines and the people of South African Kalahari. How can we be satisfied to be people of one book?[8]

Or as Elaine Pagels puts it,

What I have come to love in the wealth and diversity of our religious traditions--and the communities that sustain them--is that they offer the testimony of innumerable people to spiritual discovery, encouraging us, in Jesus' words, to 'seek and you shall find'.[9]

To summarize: Like a motivational speaker, the biblical narratives serve to inspire and invite persons to experience God, to enter into the narrative to discover if perchance, God might work in them as He did with the biblical characters and persons of other religions. Though not inspired, the Bible does serve as an "existential-inspirational" stimulant for spiritual seekers in order to "experience" God in a fresh way and thus make their contribution to the grand Story of God's evolving dealings with all religious people.

In part, this scheme of spirituality may explain why emerging Christians speak so adoringly about the narratives of the Scriptures, but do not equally embrace their didactic counterparts; because for them, doctrines, confessions, and creeds imply a fixity and finality to The Story. Thus, two young non-emergent authors write: "Defining the emerging church is like nailing Jell-O to the wall." [10] Later, they observe: "The emerging church thrives on eschewing definition, of itself and of its theology." [11] This is to be expected because for the emerging church, doctrines imply definiteness about belief and spirituality which they, in their postmodern bent of mind, disdain. Any claim of "definiteness" would limit and impede the spiritual interchanges with the devout from other faith groups and "narratives." For purpose of supplementing the grand metanarrative with their own faith journeys, emergents need their spirituality, as that of others, to be in flux so that together all might worship before the shrine of their personal and mutual "experiences."

Is "story spirituality" affecting the church? Let's connect a few dots. Through Wm. Paul Young's best selling religious allegory *The Shack* we note the following Q & A: "Why are so many heading for 'The Shack'?" asks *USA Today* reporter Cathy Grossman, to which Lynn Garrett, senior religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*, answers, "People are not necessarily concerned with how orthodox the theology is. People are into the story and how the book strikes them emotionally."**[12]** We can only note how Garrett's take illustrates the warning of the apostle when he predicted, "**For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.**" (Emphasis mine, 2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Admittedly, the "narrative" form of literature (i.e., the Gospels) comprises the greatest portion of Holy Writ, but it does so as the counterpart of the didactic or teaching form (i.e., Paul's epistles). Both forms complement each other. For example, the Gospels (narrative) inform us that Jesus died and rose again, while Paul's letters give theological explanation as to why Christ died and rose again. In other words, the didactic elucidates the narrative. Thus, the Bible is more than just a collection of inspirational "stories." The Bible really does inform us concerning the culminating salvific work of God in the world (See Hebrews 1:1-2; 1 Peter 1:20; Jude 3.). As the record testifies, there is finality regarding the incarnation and the redemption wrought by Christ (John 1:14; 1 John 2:2).

### Paul: The "Unhip" Communicator

Paul would have eschewed and avoided doing ministry by incorporating the glitzy pizzazz and cool communication after the manner of a theater church. Upfront, he informed the Corinthians, "**For Christ sent me . . . to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect**" (Emphasis mine, 1 Corinthians 1:17, KJV). In this regard, the apostle tells us that, "**The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ . . .**" (Emphasis mine, 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, KJV).

Bringing together "master communicators" to *Story* contradicts the manner of Paul's ministry, for about his ministry the apostle related, "**I . . . did not come [to you] with excellence of speech or of wisdom . . . For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. . . . And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom . . . that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.**" (1 Corinthians 2:1-5, NKJV)

Then Paul later wrote about "feedback" he received from his audiences--"**For his letters', they say, 'are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible'**" (2 Corinthians 10:9). Thus it can be observed that even in the apostolic age, audiences were more attracted to style than substance. So with *Story* and its "master communicators" and theatrics, one must think that the medium will corrupt, if not obstruct the message.

### Conclusion

Four decades ago one liberal theologian wrote that the Scripture was only authoritative,

. . . insofar as it provides clarifying images which illuminate experience . . . Theology within this framework articulates the meaning of the inherited tradition of the Christian community in the light of empirical knowledge supplied by the sciences. It makes use of the resources of the philosophical community and of other religious traditions. *It seeks to incorporate insights available from literature and the arts.*[13]

After stating good theology will use any contemporary source that will assist "in making sense out of the meaning of human life," the theologian goes on to state that,

The Bible . . . is not to be regarded as an arbitrary dictator of dogma, [or] as an infallible source of truth . . . in religion . . . Rather [the Bible] is self-authenticating as an especially rich treasury of ideas, symbols, ideals, and models of God and man. . . . The Bible is to be believed because it actually functions to make sense out of experience . . . The final test . . . of religious truth is the intuition of the individual person.[14]

The issues of spirituality raised by *Story* could, and perhaps should, ignite a controversy similar to that which besieged the Byzantine church from the middle of eight to the middle of the ninth century (717-843 AD). Then, "The dispute involved church and state over the presence of paintings, mosaics, and statutes in churches . . ."[15] In those centuries they contended over their *images*. In this century, we ought to be contending over the *images* aroused by the *imaginings* stimulated in by the *experiences* which theater church, with its "master communicators, music, light shows, drama, comedy, and whatever," *inspires* in the human heart.

It is impossible to see how the emotiveness and imaginings of theater church will serve in any way to promote the mind of Christ in believers by reining their thoughts into obedience to Him. So, "Believers, Beware!" *EXODUS THIRTY-TWO* may soon be coming to a theater-church near you!

---

## ENDNOTES

[1] Laurence Urdang, Editor in Chief, *The Random House College Dictionary*, Revised (New York: Random House, Inc., 1988): 839.

[2] Lillian Kwon, "Improving the Storytelling of the Gospel," *The Christian Post*, Friday, June 26, 2009 Posted: 06:46 PM EDT.

Online: <http://www.christianpost.com:80/article/20090626/improving-the-storytelling-of-the-gospel/index.html>. "Story" is geared toward anyone who communicates the Gospel, including pastors, children's leaders, teachers, authors, and those in the creative arts team or worship team.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003): 161.

[8] Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006): 44.

[9] Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003): Inside flyleaf of the hard cover edition.

[10] Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008): 16-17.

[11] Ibid. 78.

[12] Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Aim at 'spiritually interested' sparks 'The Shack' sales," *USA Today*, May 1, 2008 ([http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-04-30-shack\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-04-30-shack_N.htm)).

[13] Emphasis mine, Kenneth Cather, *Christian Biopolitics: A Credo & Strategy for the Future* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971): 113-114. My thanks to Sara Leslie for supplying this citation.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Peter Toon, "Iconoclastic Controversy," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Revised Edition, J.D. Douglas, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978): 498.