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Book Review: Worship and Mission After Christendom by Alan and Eleanor Kreider

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Dahlfred: Book Review: *Worship and Mission After Christendom* by Alan and E and desires to see it experience biblical growth” (16). His book is therefore

structured to be used either as a manual to be consulted with particular needs in mind or as a textbook to provide overall perspective in important church growth principles. McIntosh seeks to make his book more pertinent to real-life ministry by beginning each chapter with an ongoing case study detailing a church-centered conversation among three fictional pastors. The pastors’ conversation sets the stage for each discussion and engages the reader by illustrating the discussion’s practical significance. *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* thereby becomes much more inviting to those who eschew principle without narrative.

The primary strength of the book lies in McIntosh’s interaction with over 1,000 churches throughout his career and his practical knowledge of what happens in most churches over several generations of ministry. That same fact, however, lends itself to one of the book’s limitations—that is, the research behind McIntosh’s assertions is not always clear. Many of his observations come from his experience in consulting individual churches. However, he could have strengthened his argument by citing more statistics from the churches he has served.

Additionally, much of the research he cites—particularly for the discussion of church life cycles—was published decades before *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* was released. As a result, the possibility exists that some of the findings may not be contemporarily applicable. Without doubt, many of the principles he sets forth regarding the church life cycle are relatively timeless. He could have strengthened his assertions, however, by presenting more current, widespread data as evidence for his argument.

McIntosh has provided the church with a tremendous tool for expanding kingdom impact. His thoughts are clear, well-articulated, and easy to read. He has provided a resource both for those who wish to read about, diagnose, and help their own churches, and for those who wish to better understand church growth dynamics as a whole. In the end, McIntosh has written yet another book that will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers, and will provide intensely valuable help to churches seeking to reach that often elusive next level of ministry impact.

Alan and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission After Christendom*. Scottsdale, Ariz.: Herald Press, 2011, 322 pp., \$19.99

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Are worship and mission doomed to be in never-ending competition for the time and resources of the church? Must we choose between looking inwardly and

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 18
looking outwardly? In *Worship and Mission After Christendom*, Alan and Eleanor Kreider give a resounding “NO,” pointing readers to a third way of looking at the relationship between worship and mission in light of the demise of Christendom in the West.

Raised on the mission field in Asia, Alan and Eleanor Kreider served as Mennonite missionary teachers in England for thirty years before returning to the United States, where they continue their work teaching, speaking, and writing about issues of worship, church history, and peacemaking. In *Worship and Mission After Christendom*, the Kreiders bring together the results of their studies in these areas and their personal experience to present an alternative vision of the relationship between worship and mission.

Drawing heavily upon their study of 1 Corinthians 11–14 and associated church history, the authors advance the thesis that the church’s worship is for building up Christians and aligning them with God’s purposes in the world. They assert that the “primary purpose [of worship] is not the converting of outsiders; it is the glorification of God and the sanctification of human beings” (141). So, how is worship related to mission? They write, “[W]orship affects the church’s growth by building up members so they will participate effectively in God’s mission” (140). As the authors understand it, “God’s mission is bigger than saving souls; it is bigger than building the church” (52). It also includes the broader concept of shalom, encompassing reconciliation, and peacemaking (53–54).

The authors spend the bulk of their book chronicling and analyzing the nature and practices of worship and mission in the eras of pre-Christendom, during Christendom, and now post-Christendom. In European Christendom, “worship was unavoidable” and “mission was unnecessary” (24). This state of affairs led to a compromised church. When mission did happen, it was always “out there” in some far away land—the job of specialists (chapter two). The authors suggest that the solution to this problem is that the church adopts a *missio dei* understanding, namely turning our attention to the grand narrative of God’s reconciling work in Scripture and in the world (chapter three).

To find our role in the *missio dei*, the authors turn our attention to the pre-Christendom era. During this period, Christians adopted the Greco-Roman practice of meeting together in homes for a meal, which was followed by after dinner conversation (101). In chapter 6, which forms the core of the book, the authors do an historical reconstruction of the worship in the Corinthian church, drawing upon evidence from 1 Corinthians 11–14 and cultural background information. While admitting that we do not know much about patterns of worship in the early church and that only “in the fourth century, did a

Dahlfred: Book Review: Worship and Mission After Christendom by Alan and E homogenization of Christian worship take place” (92), the authors proceed on the unsubstantiated assumption that the pattern of worship seen in Corinth was prescribed by Paul for all the churches he started. Thus in later chapters, they talk of “the Pauline vision of table and word” (123) and “Paul’s meal and symposium practice” (134).

Questions of standard practice aside, the authors paint a fascinating picture of what worship might have (ideally) been like at Corinth and the ways in which inequality is corrected as people of all socio-economic classes eat and fellowship together. Taking 1 Corinthians 11–14 as prescriptive, the authors draw out certain directives for worship that they see as essential, especially the need for every member to participate in the service (“each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation . . .” 1 Cor 14:26). Worship services that are directed by only a few people, often pastors, are seen as unfortunate, non-participatory “hold overs” from Christendom. Later chapters go into great detail as to how churches of various types can integrate times of testimony into their worship services. This type of multivoiced worship is seen by the authors as an important part of Paul’s directives for worship that was long neglected under a Christendom model.

The second half of the book (chapters seven to thirteen) fleshes out the implications of the model of church presented in chapter six, making practical suggestions for how churches can edify believers and equip themselves for mission through worship. Chapters eight and twelve are perhaps the best in the book. The authors explain the nature and goals of worship, providing probing questions that every church needs to ask about her own worship. A key point is that outsiders will find the Christian faith attractive, not because Christian worship is instantly comprehensible (230), but because of the distinctive missional living of transformed Christians.

There is much to like within this book. I found myself cheering as the authors advocated for God-centered worship that exegetes the character of God, tells the grand narrative of what He is doing in this world, and edifies believers. Their vision for worship is a breath of fresh air compared to the bankrupt models of hyped-up revival meetings that dominate so many gatherings. Any church that gives even half of the thought and attention to worship as the authors have done will reap a great blessing in the lives of the members.

However, the book also manifests some bothersome liabilities. The theme of non-violence shows up with great regularity, which is understandable given the authors’ Mennonite background. However, the concept of non-violence comes up in some unexpected places. Discussing the Bible’s grand narrative, the authors state that “God saves the world by nonviolent means . . . through incarnation, cross, and

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 18
resurrection” (158). The cross was non-violent? A couple pages later, we are told
that baptized believers “cannot live missional lives unless they understand widely
assumed myths such as the efficacy of redemptive violence” (161). Although it was
not discussed, this phrase made me curious to know the authors’ view on
substitutionary atonement.

It was also rather troubling that the authors’ vision of living out the *missio dei*
is largely composed of Christians getting involved in social, ecological, and
political causes. While affirming the value of traditional missionaries (chapter two)
and admitting there “will continue to be need for some Westerners . . . to go as
long-term missional partners” (216), there is a general downplaying of the need for
proclamation-type ministries and the sending of cross-cultural missionaries. The
“worldwide interdependence” and “global partnerships” that the authors envision
(chapter eleven) mainly consist of churches from the West and the global south
visiting each other and learning from each other. While such partnerships are
good, there remain many parts of the world today without a viable indigenous
church with which to partner. The need to send missionaries “out there” has not
perished along with Christendom, and merely sending short-term teams with “a
special competence in psychology, youth work or the theology and practice of
peacemaking” (216) will be insufficient if we want to see disciples made and
churches planted among the millions of people in the world today living in
unreached people groups.

163

Despite these and other shortcomings, the Kreiders have an important message
to share with the contemporary church about the relationship between worship
and mission now that Christendom assumptions are no longer valid. While some
readers will disagree with their low church ecclesiology, broad ecumenism
(embracing both Catholics and emergents), or pacifist tendencies, the questions
they ask about worship and mission deserve careful attention. If this book causes
Christians and churches to re-examine the Scriptures and re-evaluate their
assumptions about worship and mission, then the Kreiders will have done a great
service to the church of Christ.