

Does Sunday Morning Church Really Need All This Glitter, Showmanship and Gimmickry?

posted by Rob Kerby, Senior Editor, "Retro-Church" blog

What's wrong with church today? Are we in danger of turning worship into a flashy concert? Of watering down the message so nobody is offended? Of forgetting the simplicity of the Gospel?



I grew up with a preacher's kid. He was a fake following in the footsteps of his flimflamming father who did a great Vegas-style act at the grand piano. Both papa and son could turn on the tears and put on a fantastic show. The boy did a spectacular display of repentance and sorrow each year at our summer camp's final-night altar call. He craved the spotlight. Moments after his public *mea culpas* he'd be back to his crass self, wanting to know if I'd scored with my girlfriend, claiming he was going to sneak away with his latest blonde during the baptismal service.

Privately, he and his dad were cynical and profane. But my childhood buddy has gone on to minister to a glittery mega-church much applauded in his denomination, a church distinguished by flash and showmanship and big attendance numbers – very much in the footsteps of his late father.

A few weeks ago, my friend's son took his own life. It didn't make the headlines like another mega-church preacher's son's suicide out in California. But I wish I had taken time with my friend's boy. I wondered if he was ever exposed to the true gospel of Christ's self-denying love.



As I sat in a local church with its multiple video screens, kids on guitars silhouetted by stage lights, and overpowering music that defies congregational singalong, I remembered my old hypocritical buddy. Annoyed by all the noise of the day's service, I pulled out my iPhone and to the consternation of my wife began surfing the Internet. I glanced around and noticed I was not alone. And when I googled "church" and "gimmicks," I was not surprised to find a number of Christian leaders are just as puzzled as I with church that has turned into spectator entertainment.



“We have had gospel rock and praise dancing in worship services,” writes Samuel Koranteng-Pipim on the website [Affirm](#), “gospel puppets, gospel clowns, gospel cafés/discos and gospel theatrics/dramas for our outreach to youth, young adults, and the ‘unchurched.’ Now, it seems, we must have gospel magicians for our church services and weeks of prayer. By resorting to these ‘gospel gimmicks,’ are we in danger?”

“What is the true definition of ‘church’?” asks [Stewart Wilkerson](#). “Big screens? Best logo design? The newest technology? The more I think about church, the more I see how astray church has become. Church isn’t about hymnals. Church isn’t about singing the latest song that has the most hits on iTunes. Church is about Jesus...and Jesus only.”



“‘World’s Largest Church,’ ‘World’s Fastest Growing Church,’ ‘America’s Fastest Growing Sunday School,’ ‘Fastest Growing Church in the State.’ These are frequently heard and seen slogans in these modern days,” writes W.F. Bell in [The Gimmick Gospel](#). “But, isn’t it a little silly to brag or boast about numbers? Where in all of God’s Word does it tell us to gimmick people into attending church services or Sunday School?”

“Millennials’ intolerance of hypocrisy necessitates that those of us in leadership do more than preach about values that this demographic holds dear,” writes [Dorothy Greco in Christianity Today magazine](#).

Megachurch pastor Ray Kollbocker says today’s young adults “want Christianity to be more than information. They want to see how Christianity actually changes the world, not just talk about the change.”



“Because millennials have such an intense hunger for transparent relationships and truth,” writes Greco, “churches could foster intergenerational mentoring within their communities rather than depending upon the more impersonal leadership classes.”

And they hate fakery. Last week another longtime friend of mine was found dead in his Houston apartment. He was the son of a famous evangelist who was more or less the Rush Limbaugh of the 1960s – a radio preacher whose financial support came from a then-amazing million-name mailing list of “partners” who listened to his warnings on late-night radio.

This televangelist dreamed that his son and namesake would follow him at the microphone and in the pulpit, but the boy was tender and sincere – and refused to preach. At age 4, he was first trotted out at one of this father’s legendary crusades where the little boy sang “Jesus Loves Me” to the adoring crowd – and was hooked.

Although as an adult, he was too honest to fill his father's pulpit, he was addicted to the love of the audiences. He cut multiple record albums – all sold at his father's venues – and as an adult pursued a career in opera.

But he was scarred and wounded — a victim of spiritual abuse. In his final days, he confided in me having found peace with his Maker. “I don't know that I ever was really saved as a kid,” he told me. “But I know I am now.” Even so, he had no desire to share his faith from the pulpit – although his father's name would have gotten him on national TV and into churches nationwide. He cringed at the very idea – not even wanting to write a book about growing up with his famous dad.



My friend just wanted to love Jesus quietly. He was tired of the glitter and the gimmicks. And so are so many others.

“Centuries ago,” writes Koranteng-Pipim, “the prophet Jeremiah spoke out against this tendency on the part of God's people to mimic the gimmicks found in other faiths: ‘My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. . . . Now why go to Egypt to drink

water from the Shihor? And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River?’ (Jer 2:13, 18 NIV).



“Unfortunately, some of us pastors and church leaders are sometimes to blame. We appear to put popularity, job security, position, and the illusion of outward success above our duty to the Chief Shepherd. We seem to fear that if we were to take a stand against these forms of worldliness in our churches, we would create enemies and threaten our support among our constituencies.

“If it is true that rock music (disguised as praise music and praise dancing) is the most effective medium to reach young people today, why is it that math teachers and chemistry professors don’t set their classes to heavy-beat and hip-swinging music? Common sense tells us that these entertainment media are not the most credible methods to communicate serious messages.



“A doctor, meeting an apprehensive patient, does not dress like a clown in order to tell his patient that she has cancer. Jesus did not use the gimmicks of entertainment to proclaim his Sermon on the Mount. On the day of Pentecost, Peter did not set up a drum set or ask Mary to lead out in praise dancing to announce the resurrection of Jesus and His enthronement in heaven.

“And Paul did not persuade people on Mars Hill using gospel magicians.”

“What a perversion of the one true gospel is this modern ‘gimmick gospel.’” writes Bell in [*The Gimmick Gospel*](#). “Give-aways, gadgets, and games are weekly emphasized to keep the crowds coming. It’s ‘Balloon Sunday’ one week, ‘Ice cream Sunday’ another week, and ‘BoZo-the-Clown Sunday’ the next week. On and on the ‘gimmick gospel’ goes, going so far as to have ‘karate preachers’ performing their stunts, and ‘cut-off-your-tie’ days.



“After getting thousands to attend Sunday School, what is taught them after getting them there?” asks Bell. “How tragic that multitudes of blind people are being led by blind leaders, ‘And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch’ (Matt. 15:14).

“Let us rid this country of the ‘gimmick gospel,’ for it is fakery, faulty and foolish. And in the words of Charles Spurgeon: ‘We can do without modern learning, but we cannot do without the ancient gospel. We can do without oratory and eloquence, but we cannot do without Christ crucified. Lord, revive Thy work by giving us the old-fashioned gospel back again in our pulpits.’”



“The millennial generation’s much-talked-about departure from church might lead those of us over 30 to conclude that they have little interest in Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth,” writes [Greco in *Christianity Today*](#).

Is keeping up with today’s culture a bad thing? Must we shun technology and stagecraft? “The only thing permanent around here is change,” once quipped my friend and pastor, the late Jamie Buckingham, who was a bestselling author and the most popular columnist at a national Christian magazine.



Jamie’s sermons were designed to draw in the seeker. “People don’t come to church wanting to feel bad,” he once told me when I asked why he didn’t preach hell and damnation. “They come to church wanting to feel better.” As a result, his church embraced technology and change. I remember well when a new music minister introduced new praise choruses. The congregation had been cutting-edge once upon a time, forsaking hymnals for overhead projectors and edgy praise songs. But they’d relaxed into their own new traditions — and this new songleader with his unfamiliar, new songs was irritating, prompting Jamie to have to remind them of their cutting-edge history.



Why introduce the new? Why embrace videos and special effects? Nobody wants to be stuck in a rut — particularly a church trying to be relevant to the next generation.

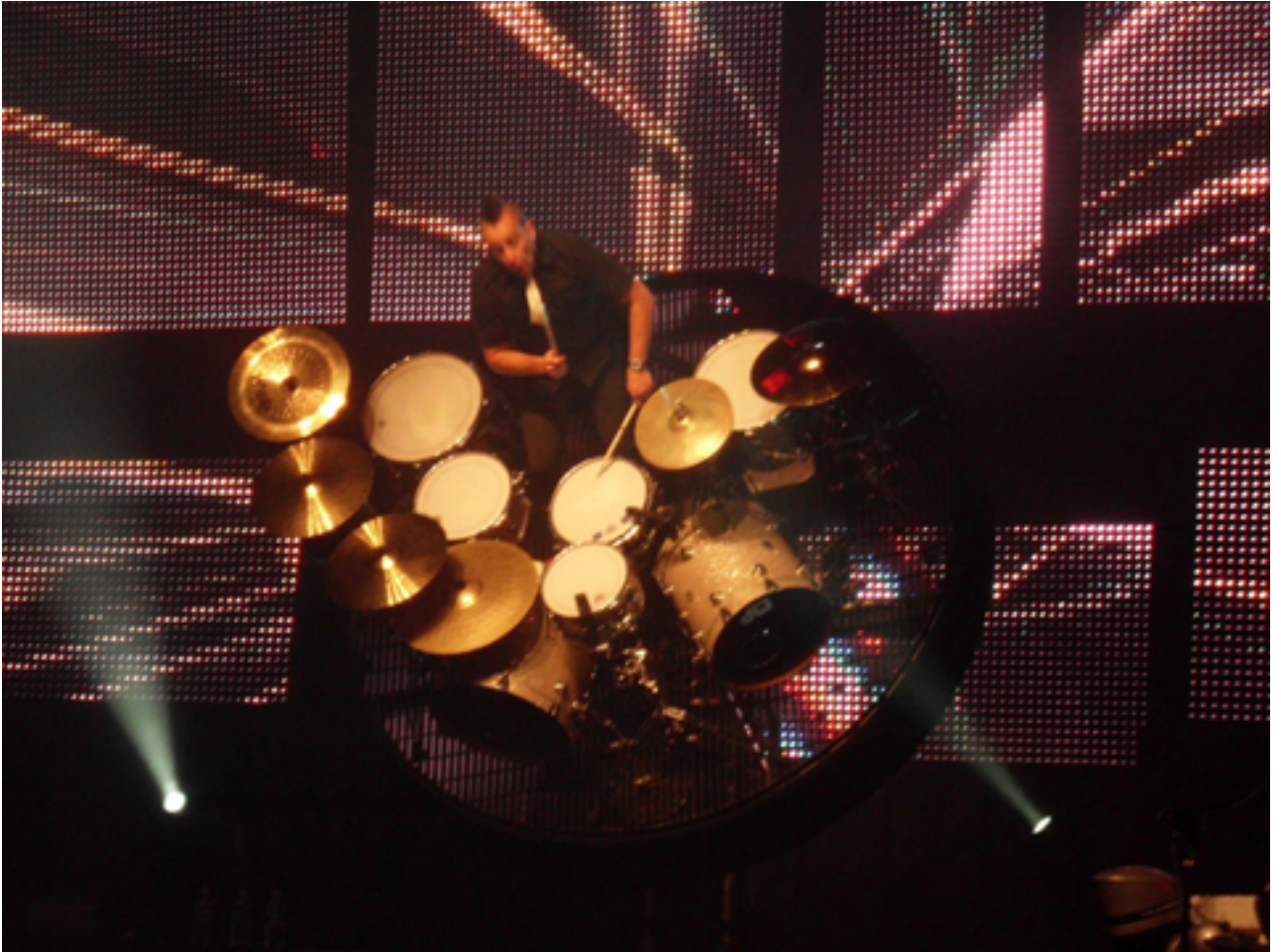
“Unfortunately,” writes Greco, we’re seeing “many Protestant pastors relying on a consumer business model to grow and sustain their churches. This template for doing church and the millennials’ hunger for authenticity has caused an ideological collision.

“Seeker-sensitive services originally promised to woo post-moderns back into the fold. Out the stained glass window went the somewhat formal 45-minute exegetical sermon, replaced by a shorter, story-based talk to address the ‘felt needs’ of the congregants while reinforcing the premise that following Jesus would dramatically improve their quality of life.



“Contemporary worship had already found its way into the mainstream, but their new model nudged the church further toward a rock-concert feel. Finally, programs proliferated, with programs for nearly every demographic, from Mothers of Preschoolers to Red Glove Motorcycle Riders.

“None of these changes were pernicious or even poorly intentioned,” admits Greco. “In the case of my previous church, choosing the seeker model began innocently. The staff endeavored to create a wide on-ramp for folks who might ordinarily bypass the sanctuary in favor of Starbucks. (As an incentive, we provided fair-trade coffee and bagels each week.) Trained not to assume that everyone was on the same page politically or spiritually, we sought to have friendly, nuanced conversations with visitors.



“Being aware of those who come through the doors of any organization is a good thing. I have walked out of many services without a single person engaging with me. However, many churches gradually, and perhaps unwittingly, transitioned from being appropriately sensitive to the needs of their congregants to becoming – if you’ll permit some pop-psychologizing – co-dependent with them.

“What does co-dependence look like within a church?” asks Greco. “Avoiding sections of Scripture out of fear that certain power pockets will be offended. Believing that repeat attendance depends primarily upon the staff’s seamless execution of Sunday morning—rather than the manifest presence of God. Eliminating doleful songs from the worship repertoire because they might contradict the through line that ‘following Jesus is all gain.’



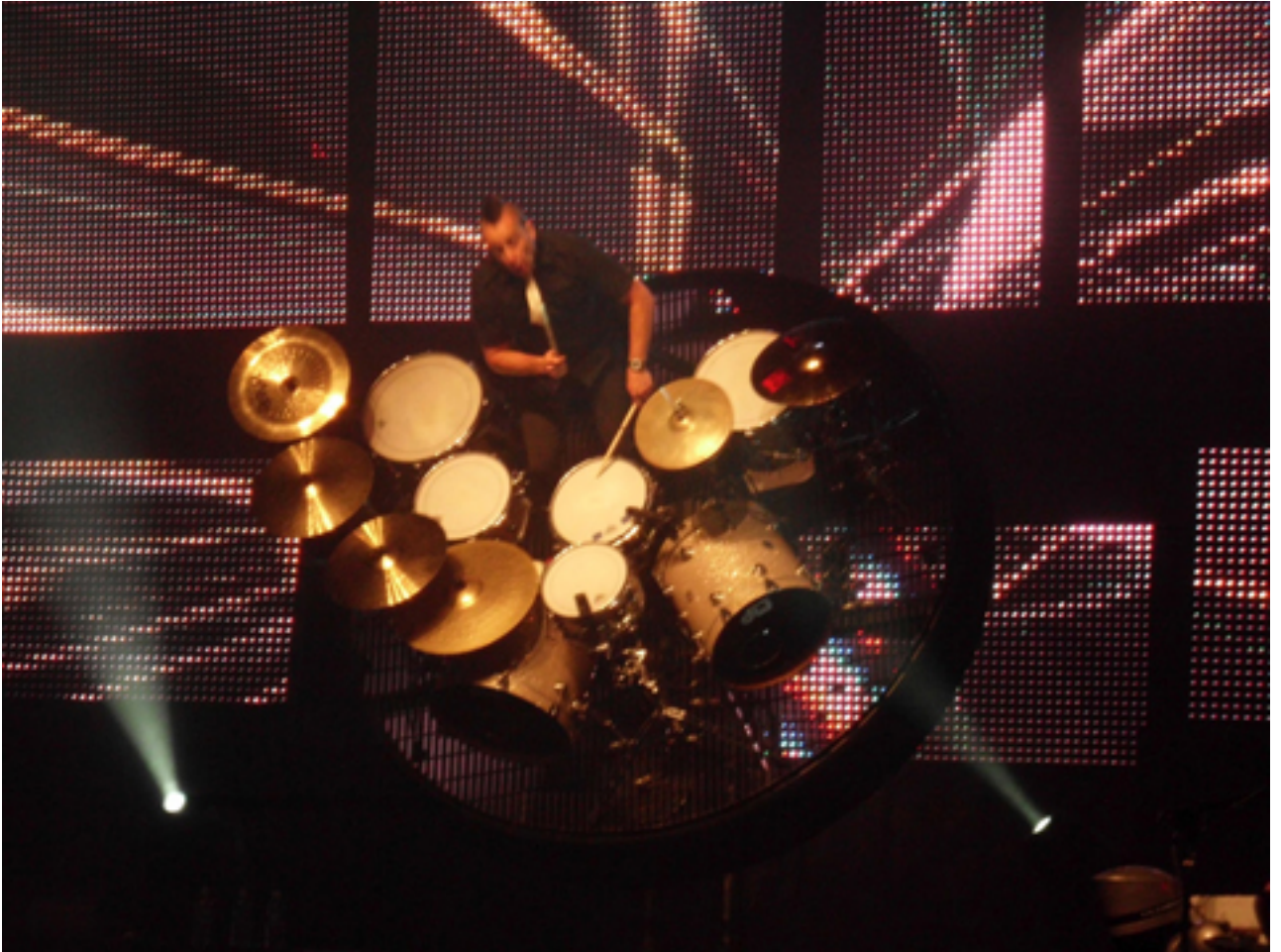
“Jesus was neither a co-dependent nor a businessman. He unashamedly loved those on the margins and revealed himself to all who were searching. He seemed quite indifferent about whether or not he disappointed the power brokers. Additionally, Jesus understood that the irreducible gospel message—that we are all sinners in need of being saved—was, and always will be, offensive. No brilliant marketing campaign could ever repackage it.

“I have been following after Jesus for more than three decades and the gospel still makes me bristle. Love those who publicly maligned me? Confess my sins to a friend? You’re kidding Jesus, aren’t you? Only he’s not kidding. Both his words and his life clearly demonstrate that to align ourselves with him means that we must be willing to forsake everything so that we might become more like him.



“Rather than helping congregants in this endeavor, churches that bend into their mercurial whims foster a me-first mentality. This actually plays into one of the potential root sins of this generation: self-absorption. While it’s all too easy for those of us over the age of 30 to poke fun at their selfie antics, I think young Christians actually want the church to help them reign in their narcissism. Writer Aleah Marsden told me, ‘We definitely want to see Jesus at the center because the rest of the world keeps shouting that we’re the center. We don’t need the church to echo the world.’

“As they clamor for a communion supper with the best wine and freshly baked bread, the seeker-sensitive, consumer model has offered them treacherous grape juice and dry cracker pieces, leaving them unsatisfied and frustrated.



“If the Barna Group statistics are accurate,” notes Greco, “more than 8 million 20-somethings have given up on church or Christianity. Do their actions indicate a need for us to, as David Kinnaman suggests, ‘change our church structure, guided by the unchanging truths of Scripture to nurture their unique gifts and calling?’ Or is their departure an invitation for all of us who consider ourselves Christians to prioritize transformation into the image of Christ?”

It may be time for evangelicals to learn something from the Catholics. At the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII, famously called for a window to be opened and challenged his leaders to invite the Holy Spirit back.



Vast changes were made to the Catholic service. In the years that followed, the mass became much less a liturgical show observed by a silent faithful. Congregational singing was welcomed back. Members of the congregation were invited to the podium to read the day's text and assist in serving communion.

Today the new pope is taking it further, challenging his leaders to humble themselves, to wash the feet of the poor and take themselves off of pedestals.

As a preacher's son, I feel the pain of the other pastors' kids with whom I grew up. So many have quietly shunned the flash and the spotlight. Too many have left the church.



One of the most remarkable exceptions is a preacher's son I've known since he was eight years old. Now in his 50s, John Andrew Loveall quietly retreated a decade ago to rural Central America where he established a school for Mayan tribal kids whose families' poverty forces them to work. Eight-year-olds sell tourist trinkets and their 10-year-old brothers shine shoes. None were able to attend school until Loveall established *Escuela Integrada Para Ninos Trabajadores* – *the Integrated School for Working Kids* – which now has an enrolment of more than 400 in the tourist town of Antigua, Guatemala's colonial capital.



Those kids are embracing the simple Gospel as they learn to read, write and do arithmetic. Many have gone on to high school and college. They know the Bible. They know that a loving God hears their prayers and wants to make a difference in their lives – and has a plan for each one of them if they will quietly seek it and listen to Him speaking to their hearts.

They've been changed by the simple Gospel of Jesus Christ. And by a pastor practicing that simple Gospel.

Read more: <http://blog.beliefnet.com/news/2013/09/does-church-really-need-all-this-glitter-showmanship-and-gimmickry.php#ixzz2kAMac6iK>