

MEDIATING FAITH: FAITH FORMATION IN A TRANS-MEDIA ERA, by Clint Schnekloth. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. Pp. 126. \$29.00 (paper).

Clint Schnekloth, pastor at a Lutheran church in Arkansas, has provided a timely volume. The book has its origin as Schnekloth's DMin dissertation at Fuller Seminary, yet it reads nothing like a stiff dissertation written for the small audience of an academic committee with the feel of an inside conversation. Rather, with boldness, depth, and well-written prose, the author takes us into an important and confusing conversation on our ubiquitous media culture, and how it might be possible to do faith formation within it. The book is no pragmatically driven help book; while the

reader will find ample examples, and even interesting dissections of Facebook and World of Warcraft, at its core the text is a theoretical essay that seeks to recalibrate our very perspective on new media and faith formation.

Schnekloth begins his project by stating a near truism that nevertheless comes alive in a new way through his rich sentences. Schnekloth reminds the reader that the church always seems to be behind in the cultural reality, and not simply in the sense of trends, but more damningly, when it comes to the depth of experiencing the significance of our neighbors' meaning and identity formation in our cultural realms. Schnekloth even goes so far as to say that pastors and the church broadly should be "ashamed," not so much for ignorance *per se*, but because this ignorance has been covered in a layer of moral superiority. He gives the example of a pastor disparaging Second Life without ever taking the time to experience it. His whole project is the invitation to actually experience this cultural reality (as much as it is possible to do so in a book—which he is deeply aware of) and think new thoughts about it.

Chapter one begins in that direction. Schnekloth starts with a very well done reflection on his own development as a preacher, discussing how he moved from a manuscript preacher to an extemporaneous preacher. The author uses this personal experience to discuss the changes we are facing as we move away from a bookish culture to a visual/image culture. The chapter asks interesting questions about how, so often, our forms of faith formation are still too tied to the medium of the book. This is problematic to Schnekloth because the forming of our brain happens no longer within a book culture but through the visual/image media. He nicely discusses neuroscience and the plasticity of the brain to show that the dominant bookish ways of church faith formation simply function like square pegs in round holes.

But it must be stated that *Mediating Faith* is no blind apologetic for new media. In chapter

two Schnekloth enters into significant conversation with the critics of new media. This chapter not only shows Schnekloth's overall thoughtfulness, but keeps the book ruddered, steering away from floating into the warm, sleepy waters of over-optimism. Chapter three moves slightly away from direct conversation with games and the internet, to discuss in depth the catechumenate. Throughout the project, Schnekloth takes pains to show that all of Christian faith, and most particularly ways of faith formation, are media. Here he explores how the catechumenate mediates a reality that is formative, exploring whether the catechumenate might not be a better technology of faith formation for us. It would be a move to a time before the book, to live out of faith in a time after the book.

Chapter four is a very small hiccup in the text. Standing alone, it is excellent and deeply insightful, but it is, as Schnekloth states, originally a stand-alone lecture. The chapter has great value because the author wonderfully explores gaming—and not only culturally, but theologically. Yet, there are places where the argument repeats itself and even uses quotes from elsewhere again. But, this small blip recedes quietly into the background as chapter five discusses the formative power of digital spaces by exploring the ELCA clergy Facebook page the author created. This is a very interesting chapter and one with which pastors should wrestle deeply.

Schnekloth has sought to explore the new media, but not just sociologically, psychologically, or even with a religious propensity. He has, quite significantly, succeeded at providing an interdisciplinary project. But Schnekloth wants this project to also be theological, and he knows that for this to be the case it is not enough simply to talk about the church in its relation to culture. For his project to be theological, it must speak of the act and being of God. Chapter six is his contribution in this direction as he turns to the Trinity, and most directly, to the work of the Spirit, to discuss

God's presence in the new media. This is a very well done chapter with its best contribution, in my mind, being the way Schneklath makes a case for the Spirit's connection to materiality and sending us "into the world and into life." Chapter seven concludes the project by continuing the theological discussion and moving into conversations on practice.

Mediating Faith, in the mind of this reviewer, is a rich offering, a very rare book on the new media that not only provides the reader many handles, but is deeply theoretical. And these theoretical underpinnings are richly theological. This makes Schneklath's book a must-read for all pastors, faith formation leaders, and theologians that are brave enough to leave the antiquated and enter into the depth and possibilities of our time.

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