

Aaron Klinefelter
1757 Mills Ave.
Norwood, OH 45212
aaronk@fuller.edu

Shenk, Wilbert R.
1995 Write the Vision: The church renewed. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press
International.

Wilbert R. Shenk is “Professor of Mission History and Contemporary Culture in the School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary” (1995: back cover). Additionally, of course, he is the professor for this Individualized Distance Learning course, Contemporary Culture in Missiological Perspective. It may seem foolhardy, and perhaps it is, to review the professor’s own book for the class I am taking. However, it is not too much of a stretch to say I could not do otherwise. Shenk’s little book, *Write the Vision*, has infected my consciousness and I am eager to spend more time in its midst.

The thesis that Shenk presents to the readers is concise: “the engagement of the church with modern Western culture has resulted in the marginalization of Christian faith” (ibid: 2). He develops this assertion through four brief chapters. Before entering into the first chapter, we are introduced to two terms that will “figure prominently in the discussion here: Christendom and the Enlightenment” (ibid: 3). Shenk is careful to point out that in such limited space it is not possible to treat these subjects in depth, however they thoroughly color everything that the church has experienced in the last several hundred years.

The first chapter deals with the lack of integrity churches have in modern Western culture. The church has lost its prophetic witness because it has acquiesced to the control of the dominant culture of the land. The lack of integrity is expressed as the Christendom concept being a poor transmitter of the faith in the modern era. Shenk critiques the misconception of “Christian culture” as bankrupt. He then moves through several examples of church leaders who moved against the grain of cultural capitalization. Those

he highlights include, John Wesley, Søren Kierkegaard, A.F. Winnington-Ingram, Walter Hobbhouse, Karl Barth, and Cardinal Suhard.

In the second chapter, Shenk pursues the church's need for missional renewal. "The criterion by which we may judge the recovery of the church's identity is whether the church has a restored missional consciousness" (ibid: 32). The Christendom construct for the church was essentially a "church without mission" (ibid: 35). He goes on to contrast the church of the Reformation and Christendom with the need for a church whose essence is missional at its very core.

In the third chapter, Shenk tackles the topic of evangelization. He points out that evangelization has always been controversial. It is confrontational to the "regnant worldview and the ways in which people were held hostage by a corrupt and ill-fated system" (ibid: 54), and it is invitational. "The church that is not evangelizing is a church that does not truly believe the gospel. It is a faithless church" (ibid). He then develops the argument that evangelism in the modern church has consented to syncretism by its "uncritical appropriation of the assumptions and methodologies offered by modern culture" (ibid: 56). The "assumptions and methodologies" of which he speaks are primarily in regard to individualism and technique.

In the fourth, and final, chapter, we are presented a view of what the church could look like when taking a missional stance in Western culture. Shenk begins with the biblical narrative of the first testament and the story of Abraham. The metaphors and images of the church that evolve are the People of God, Holy Nation, and Covenant People. The church is to be formed by the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. It is to live out its calling in the world under the Reign of God and with this Reign as the disciple community's primary focus. As such, the church must confront Modernity's preoccupation with the individual self, the emphasis on technique, and the position of power and violence (ibid: 95). Shenk concludes with Karl Rahner's vision of the church

of the future as “a little flock” engaged in the missionary task of reconciliation in the world (ibid: 100).

Write the Vision: The Church Renewed, is an important work within the field of missiology as well as beyond it in the life of the local congregation and mission organization. As the first in now a long list of titles, Shenk’s little book inaugurates the *Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series* that continues to both critique and call the church forward into its redemptive and redeeming vision. In this work we are stirred from our cultural complacency and are prompted to look to the horizon to envision the hopeful future of the church. It goes without saying that this is an important book for this course. As students we are exposed to another medium of communication by which we gain insight into Dr. Shenk’s priorities and learnings. As a pastor and leader in a local congregation, “a little flock” as it were, I am challenged and encouraged by this text. It is a helpful catalyst for discussion and forward movement in our fellowship.

In sum, Shenk provides a needed corrective to the technique-driven, anthropomorphic individualism dished out by much of what is written and read in the American church. My suspicion is that the majority of pastors in the United States are familiar with, if not disciples of, Willow Creek, Purpose-Driven Church, or the like. More church leaders need to be aware of this little book’s message, as well as the wealth of vision given throughout this series of small books. The thesis is developed clearly and articulately. It is argued in a respectful and measured manner, not unlike Dr. Shenk himself. The conclusions are powerful, formative, and life-altering if given proper attention. I look forward to continued exploration of this text as I seek to minister effectively in our confusing Western milieu.