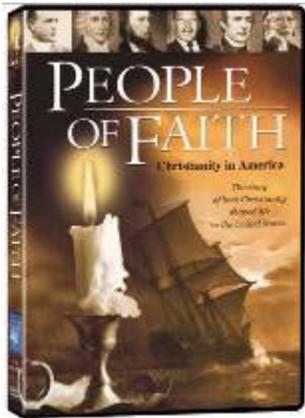


Larry Eskridge on a new video series, **People of Faith: Christianity in America**

By John M. Mulder



Abstract: *People of Faith: Christianity in America* is a new video series about the history of Christianity in America. It is organized around key questions in contemporary church life. It seeks to help people find their identity in history and better understand their fellow Christians. The primary themes are the questions of how Christians responded to American culture and how they shaped it.

The history of Christianity is probably the most neglected subject in congregational life in America. You rarely see it treated in Sunday school classes, whether it be for youth or adults. You occasionally hear a reference to church history in the pulpit, but not often.

The philosopher George Santayana declared, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” but most American congregations are willing to take the risk.

Into this gap comes a new video series, *People of Faith: Christianity in America*. It’s a two DVD, six-episode presentation of the drama of Christian faith in America culture, spanning the colonization of America to the dilemmas and diversity of Christian witness today. Each episode is approximately 30 minutes. The series is designed mainly for use in adult and youth classes in congregations or in colleges and seminaries, but it could easily be used by individuals seeking to know more about why Christianity in America has become so diverse and baffling.

While historical development is always in focus, this isn’t history as a series of chronological events. Instead, *People of Faith* is organized around contemporary questions, such as: Is America now or has it ever been a Christian nation? What is the meaning of the separation of church and state? How can the church be a

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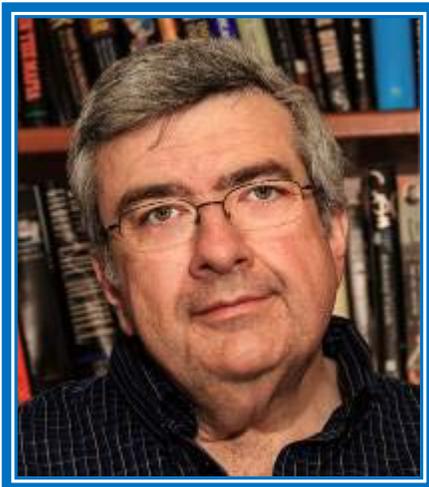
faithful Gospel witness in a pluralistic society? And, the big one: What will the church look like in the future?

It is an example of efforts to make tradition come alive and fulfill Jaroslav Pelikan’s famous dictum: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

The visual part of the series uses a diversity of paintings, photographs, film, and videotape, plus a well-written narrative, interspersed with commentary from a wide variety of experts in the field of American Christianity: Scott Appleby (Notre Dame), Joel Carpenter (Calvin College), Jean Bethke Elshtain (University of Chicago), Curtis J. Evans (University of Chicago), Philip Gleason (Notre Dame), Bill J. Leonard (Wake Forest), Kathryn Long (Wheaton College), Joseph E. Lowery (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), Martin E. Marty (University of Chicago), Mark Noll (Notre Dame), and others.

The DVDs include study and discussion questions for small group and class interaction, program outlines, script transcripts, and optional English subtitles.

The series has been featured in a series of 2012 articles in the magazine, *Christian History*, and won the 2013 “Silver Remi” Award for best documentary in Religion, Ethics, and Spirituality at the Worldfest Houston International Festival and the “Bronze Crown” Award for “Best Series” from International Christian Visual Media.



Dr. Larry Eskridge

People of Faith was created by the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, an organization known for its in-depth and perceptive study of American Christianity. It was funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. The producer was Dr. Larry Eskridge, Associate Director of the ISAE, who has published several works, including *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (Oxford University Press, 2013). The series was written by veteran author Steve Rabey and developed by producer/director Tim Frakes with assistance from documentarian Paul Butler. The retail price is \$29.99.

The following is an edited and abridged interview with the producer, Dr. Eskridge.

Q: What is the purpose of this series?

Eskridge: It’s primarily educational. We wanted to give an overview of the development and sweep of Christianity in America, especially the important issues where Christianity has interacted with the larger society.

Q: Who is your audience?

Eskridge: It’s mainly congregations—the people in the pews. We wanted to provide a basic foundation for folks who are not terribly familiar with some of the details and who are trying to get a better handle on what American Christianity is all about. But more broadly, it’s an educational resource for college age people and adults.

Q: Protestant and Catholic?

Eskridge: That was one of our challenges. We wanted to give the whole story at one level and not just segregate ourselves within one aspect of the American church. Because this comes from the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, people may have expected that we would have skewed to that side of the story. We consciously attempted to steer away from doing that because we really wanted to present a broad spectrum. We aimed at producing a series that would help people understand how they fit in with their neighbors and how they fit into the larger Christian history in this country.

Q: But it is definitely a church audience, one way or another?

Eskridge: Yes, absolutely. It is aimed at the churches. A person from a secular orientation could pick this up and get a better idea about their Christian neighbors, but our intention was really to target this towards churches and toward congregations.

Q: Why did the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals want to produce this series? Why did you want to do something broader than studying evangelicals?

Eskridge: One of our prime objectives is to make a contribution by educating the church public and at a popular level, better understand their heritage. Frankly,

over the years, the ISAE has been involved in a lot of projects on the academic end of things. Those have been fairly well received and made a contribution to scholarship. But in a lot of ways, that really has catered to the tweed and suede elbow patch crowd at one level, as opposed to really getting a lot of this down to the grass roots. We thought this would be an opportunity for us to serve some of the functions that we have provided for the academic audience but targeted more for folks in the pews. And from the get go, our focus was broader than most of our earlier projects. We wanted our video project to encompass more than simply an evangelical story so that a variety of Christians could recognize themselves and see how they related to other Christians and American society.

Q: The focus does seem to be on the relationship of Christianity and society and specifically, Christianity and politics, rather than the internal history of Christian churches. Why?

Eskridge: It would have been nice to include some of that. But when you’re dealing with a broad audience, we realized that the larger emphasis might be lost in the details. We saw that focusing too much on particular denominations would be like turning a fire hose on our audience with particulars of the individual groups. We made a basic decision that the larger purpose of the series would be better served by not getting too lost in the details about specific churches.

Q: One of the guiding principles of the series is clearly to recover the past for the sake of the future. In other words, you take present-day issues and then look back on their origins and how the churches have responded. Is that accurate?

Eskridge: Yes. We wanted to take a contemporary perspective and identify some issues that have deep roots in the history of American Christianity. For example, in the case of political activism, we tried to show that this didn’t start in the 1980s or even the 1960s. There’s a long tradition of American Christians wanting to affect their society. They varied quite a bit in their political opinions, and a lot of the labels we throw around today aren’t very helpful and can give the wrong idea about where people have stood on various issues over the centuries.

Q: Daniel Boorstin once described Americans as a nation of doers. Does that apply to Christians in American history and how and why?

Eskridge: Absolutely. American Christians have always been activists, whether in building the infrastructure to take care of their own or shaping the direction of their government and society. Christianity in America has not been something that has been off to the side. These traditions have really interacted with the

changes in American society and the sweep of our history. Consider what happened. You have sort of a rough hewn beginning of a few churches plopped down in the colonial setting, and then you have the size and complexity of American Christianity today. That change involved building individual congregations and denominational structures, various parachurch organizations, missions organizations, various Catholic religious orders, schools and colleges and seminaries. It has been a major undertaking in institution building. And then you have Christians interacting with their society—to shape that society, sometimes to protect their particular tradition from what they might consider harmful, or to affect particular political decisions. American Christians have put a lot of time, a lot of money, and a lot of effort into not only building their own institutions and infrastructures but also influencing the larger society.

Q: I’ve thought about the issues that you have discussed in the series—race, war, poverty, gender equality, and others. It’s very clear where you stand on these issues in the past; for example, you’re opposed to slavery. But when you get close to the present, you sort of back away without taking any kind of side or indicating what a normative position might be. Did you have a problem with these issues as you moved into the contemporary scene?

Eskridge: Yes. In the final editing stage, we sometimes thought that we were being too judgmental about an issue on which there was a wide range of opinion and that taking sides interfered with the larger story about Christians interacting with American society. I am actually glad to hear you reaffirm the fact that we didn’t seem to prescribe a particular position on some of these issues. We really wanted to describe the issues and represent honest differences within the framework of, admittedly, a brief amount of time. We wanted to allow space for discussion and response to the series, and we didn’t want to hamper its impact by coming from a particular point of view on some of the current controversies.

Q: One issue that’s very lightly touched on is the environment. From a historical point of view, that’s probably accurate. In the past, environmentalism hasn’t ranked high on the social agenda of American Christians. Was that a problem?

Eskridge: That’s a good point. The environment really began to take shape as an issue in the second half of the twentieth century. Given the larger, longer-range story of issues like church and state, the problem of race and civil rights, the role of the church in shaping society, those seemed like the enduring questions that have a heritage down to the origins of the country. Obviously the environment is a major issue today, and we need to be thinking about it and

concerned about what the church’s position is. But it is a recent enough question that it just didn’t figure into the longer sweep of the whole series.

Q: What does that say about American Christians? Were they so morally blind that they didn’t realize what they were doing to the earth and the air around them?

Eskridge: I think this is a human problem for American Christians—the limitations of our moral vision. I’d venture to say that the struggle for existence was so important until perhaps the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it tended to move environmental questions off the table for a lot of people. This is a huge blind spot. Hopefully that seems to have changed quite a bit, and maybe a new series that focused on the last century would show the environment as much more important than it was in earlier American history.

Q: Let me sharpen this to ask about a very contemporary issue. People criticize the churches for the consumerism that affects virtually every area of American Christianity. They point out that churches feel drawn toward meeting the needs of people without stepping back and saying, “What’s true here? What do people need to hear, as opposed to what they want to hear?”

Eskridge: There you get into the debate over the prophetic role of the church—the missional nature of the church versus the felt needs or narcissistic impulse of our modern society. We don’t address that issue directly in the series, but the debate raises the question of why isn’t the church doing a better job of making the case for what people need to hear, as opposed to what they want to hear. I think the series offers some perspectives that are constructive by showing that this isn’t a new issue and it has been addressed by churches in various ways.

This conundrum intensifies over the years as the goals of the churches change and as American society becomes more complex. The message was perhaps a little simpler in earlier American history. It focused on individual salvation, heaven and hell, how one deals with particular issues of personal ethics, etc. But when you begin to branch out to some of the larger questions, when you really begin talking about the issues of what society should be, that’s when it really becomes a rub, for example, slavery. That’s where the churches needed to take a stand. But then it becomes very problematic and causes division and strife, and that’s the world in which we live. That’s what we hope people will learn from the series.

Q: What did you leave out that you wished you could have covered or covered in greater depth?

Eskridge: It was tempting to try to say more about particular denominational families, but, as I’ve said, we thought we would overwhelm people with details. I wish we could have done more about the various ways in which people lived their Christianity on a day-to-day basis. Even though I was very happy with our end product, I wish we could have gotten to the core of what it was like to live the Christian faith, Sabbath to Sabbath. You couldn’t really get that sense from the series, and I regret that.

Q: In this series, you want to educate people. In one way or another, education tries to change people and move them from one way of life to another. To some degree, education also aims at their emotions, commitments, and beliefs. What were your goals?

Eskridge: Our goal was education at a very basic level. One of the things we have discovered over the years is how American Christians tend to identify with a particular period of church history—say, the early church, or medieval Catholicism and the rise of religious orders, or the Reformation. Depending on your denominational family, you rooted your identity in a moment of the church’s past. There seemed to be a missing gap in how they traced their identity to the particular features of the history of American Christianity. So we thought the basic educational purpose was to bring folks up to speed with some of the basic facts, important questions, and trends in American church history over the last few centuries. We wanted people to recognize where they and their tradition fit into the story of the people of faith and to understand their counterparts in other traditions.

We also wanted people to see that contemporary issues are not new. In a lot of ways, there’s nothing new under the sun. Our current challenges and dilemmas have very long roots—such as the separation of church and state and the churches’ interaction on social and political issues. Today’s issues are not new and unusual, and they haven’t come out of the blue. They are part of what American Christians do as they try to make their way in the world.

Q: The problems of diversity and conflict are prominent themes in the series, and tolerance seems to be the solution. Is that what binds American Christianity together? Is there any unity to the witness that American Christians bring to the world?

Eskridge: You’re right, and that gets at one of our hopes for the series. We want this series to be studied and discussed, and one of the huge questions is whether American Christianity can offer something more than the model of diversity. After all, we’re supposed to be confessing one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. The question is whether we are going to stay in the particular confines of our tradition or find ways to witness to that confession together. We hope that by raising that question in people’s minds, they will discuss it openly.

Q: We hear a lot today about the so-called “nones” in American culture, those who are spiritual but not religious, who are outside the church. And we see more and more representatives of religious traditions that are not Christian. What does the series say about people outside the church or those of other faiths?

Eskridge: In our final episode on the future of Christianity, we tried to address some of the upcoming difficulties and challenges facing the church now and in the years ahead. The main issue in our minds was the fact of increasing diversity. How are Christians going to get along with these other faiths and other religious traditions? We didn’t address very much the challenge of people who have no affiliation with any religious tradition. However, I think the series does raise the question whether the division and conflict within American churches contribute to the negative reaction to Christianity, and I hope that will emerge from study and discussion of the episodes.

Q: How is the series being used?

Eskridge: We are pretty happy with the classroom use in churches and adult study in small groups, and that’s what we intended. But we’ve also had a big surprise. Edith Blumhofer [Director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals] teaches seminars and courses for church leaders and officials from various parts of the world at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Conn. At one of these events, she had nationals from all over the world, but none from North America or Europe. They watched the series. Afterwards, they said that they really didn’t understand this American Christianity and getting an overview like this was very helpful to them. One representative from Zambia was so impressed that he is putting together a similar resource on Zambian Christianity. We didn’t foresee any sort of outcome like that, but making it available to people from other countries and cultures might be another audience for our work.

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Q: What do you hope will be the impact of this series? What will be its enduring value for American churches?

Eskridge: We hope that people will have a sense of the broad, over-arching history of American Christianity. We want them to find their own tradition and identity within that history. We also intend that people will better understand their neighbors and colleagues in American Christianity. Beyond that, we hope this series on history will launch people into a discussion of what the role of the church in our society should be. Personally, I hope that this will also stimulate more video efforts along this line. These historical videos, informed by contemporary questions, fill an important niche that is missing in the educational program of churches. We think we know what it means to be an American church because, after all, we’re in America. But we don’t understand our identity, and who we are is not understood by others. How we became who we are is a question that we need to keep on the table as an educational exploration for people in the pews.