

Eight minutes of wisdom: The Animate video series

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



My denomination's principal yearlong Bible curriculum, which I've taught several times, features video clips from Bible scholars. After a few sessions we usually drop the ten-minute clip of the talking head. The experts aren't bad. Some are the best biblical scholars alive. But the video clips are dull. Wrong and interesting would be preferable.

Animate is not boring. When I showed some *Animate* videos to a class for new members, they jumped right in, asking questions about the topic. *Animate* is crafted for the constantly distracted viewers of the YouTube age, with clever hand-drawn doodles throughout. (When I asked my eight-year-old what he thought of one clip, he said: "I like the drawings.") The series comes replete with a handsome journal for participants that leaves plenty of space for doodling ("I'm all about doodling," Lauren Winner says in a promo piece) and a leader's guide.

This seven-session series, produced by Augsburg Fortress, is designed to engage small groups on basic Christian topics: God, religion, Christ, salvation, the cross, scripture and the church. It features some of the best teachers around, including Brian McLaren, Lillian Daniel and Nadia Bolz-Weber. Coming soon is a sequel on the Bible that features William Willimon and Phyllis Tickle, among others. The architects of *Animate* are Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, pioneers of the digitally savvy church and leaders in the emerging church network.

Though the teachers in this series are excellent, I'm not sure that the cumulative impact is excellent. The sessions are too brief and the voices too disjointed. The topics are ones that have grabbed the church's best thinkers for millennia, and to whittle them down to fit an eight-minute talk seems a disservice, even in an attention-scattered age. So the series' strength is also its weakness. And though the course is packaged for those new to church, it seems better suited to those seeking to replace a thoughtless or harmful faith.

McLaren's segment shows some of the strengths and weaknesses. He has been working lately on the relation of Christianity to other religions, seeking to foster more interreligious tolerance. It's hard to imagine a more noble project. He explores the ways that language both describes and misdescribes God. He introduces listeners to the kataphatic tradition, in which we say positively what God is like (a king, a shepherd, a light, a door), and contrasts that with the apophatic tradition, in which, for McLaren, "reverent silence" is preferable to speech. He concludes with a nifty analogy to a ship on a long voyage, with God as the sea, the destination and the wind, and with doctrine as the planks on the ship that keep us alive and must occasionally be replaced.

However, I think McLaren misuses his key terms. Kataphatic speech in the tradition of the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and drawn upon deeply by Thomas Aquinas never thinks it has adequately grasped God. Rather, it holds that God has given us true words about himself in scripture. Apophatic theology describes the way even true words fail. For Pseudo-Dionysius, we can even say "God does not exist" (as McLaren himself says in opening his segment) because our language falls so far short of God's glory that even our best words falsify.

My sense is that McLaren filters the distinction through Protestant liberalism in such a way that viewers are left with little to say or unsay about God. The claim is from Pseudo-Dionysius, but the voice is Paul Tillich's, thundering his "Protestant principle": no created thing can be identified with God.

McLaren tends to assume a listener who has grown up in the church and become fed up with its otherworldliness, arrogance and dismissal of leftist politics. But most folks in my new member classes didn't grow up anything at all. They need some Christian teaching first before they can become disaffected. The video series sometimes seems pitched more for recovering former fundamentalists than for those hungry for a bite of faith for the first time.

This approach shows up in the segment with Shane Hipps, who for a time was Rob Bell's successor at Mars Hill Church in Grandville, Michigan. He has a fine piece on salvation as a this-worldly, not otherworldly, reality. He imagines someone sitting down to a six-course meal and saving room for the final course—only to realize he'd missed it. The point is clear and elegant: What if this life is the main course?

Hipps is a master preacher, and I'll remember his analogy for a long time. But is there really no final course? I "get" Jesus' this-worldly kingdom. But what if what awaits us at the end is not a negation of this life but its fulfillment? Again, the series may be too worried about correcting a faith hijacked by fundamentalists.

Some segments avoid this problem. Mark Scandrette, an early voice in the emerging church movement, cogently describes the way Jesus can be approached only in community. Jesus' commands look impossible for individuals, but when a community tries imaginatively to lean into them, possessions can be given away, the homeless welcomed, scripture lived out. Bruce Reyes-Chow, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), nicely describes the church as a family not in the saccharine sense of niceness, but in the messy sense: family is a place of turmoil, doubt, pain.

The series' best segments seem to me to be those from speakers with less upbringing in Christian faith themselves. Daniel's piece on religion describes the way "spiritual but not religious" fans unwittingly cut themselves off from a community of faith with "needs" much bigger than their own narcissism. Winner speaks honestly of her first encounter with the church and how odd the repeated reading of scripture seemed—and how she came to treasure it.

Bolz-Weber, who indeed grew up with fundies but left their ranks long ago, describes how some ways of talking about salvation fail. God is not a cigar-chomping mafia don with a great surveillance system, demanding a pound of flesh and taking it from his little boy. God isn't above the cross, uninvolved, but on the cross. God is the one who approaches us, rather than the reverse, and undoes our fearful categories. Here a doctrine of revelation undergirds the teaching.