

THE MONKEY AND THE FISH

Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church

Dave Gibbons(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)

a book report by Jack De Vries



About the author:

DAVE GIBBONS is the founding pastor of Newsong, a multisite, international third-culture church. He is an in-demand speaker, innovative strategist, and cultural specialist, with global experience in the arts, business, church, and community development. Dave is on the board of World Vision US. He's also found and chief visionary officer of Xealot, a strategic innovations group, creatively connecting resources to leaders around the world.

The title intrigued me! I picked up this book at the recent Leadership Summit hosted by Willow Creek in Australia. Dave Gibbons was one of the featured speakers – and I liked what he had to say. But as I picked up his latest book, I wondered, what do monkeys and fish have in common? This is a fair question and one that Gibbons explores in the preface of this book, which is part of the *Leadership Network Series*. The title is a takeoff of an Eastern parable about a monkey who discovered a fish swimming against the current. The fish appeared to be struggling and needed assistance, so the monkey decided to give the fish a helping hand. At great personal risk, he climbed out on a limb, reached down and grabbed the fish. Placing it on small ground, he watched as the fish showed excitement for a moment before settling into a peaceful rest.

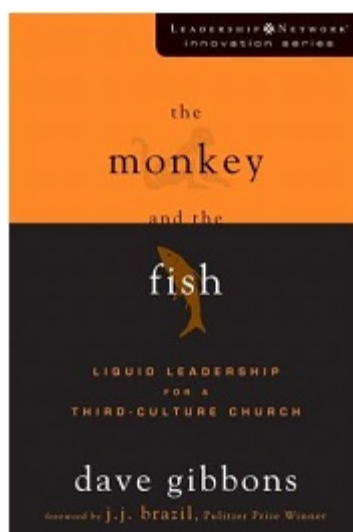
The parable is a powerful reminder that, in our efforts to help others, we can sometimes do more harm --- particularly if we don't understand the context of the one we're trying to help. Gibbons believes this principle is more true than ever as we are

living in a world of perpetual change. Our world is at a crossroads of old systems that do not work and new systems that are still being invented. How should followers of Jesus and the church respond?¹

Gibbons goes on to suggest in *The Monkey and the Fish* that to handle the immense challenges of our world, we must become adaptable and embrace what he calls "third culture" thinking. He defines "third culture" as "the mindset and will to love, learn, and serve in any culture, even in the midst of pain and discomfort." (38) This idea of third

culture is one that Gibbons derives from Genesis 12 and the second greatest commandment. Abraham was called to be a blessing to the nations – the original "great commission." And in the second greatest commandment we are called to love others as we love ourselves. For Gibbons, being third culture is not some trendy new thing in the church; it is at the heart of God. "In fact, God is third culture." (39)

At first I found it difficult to read this book; it seems to be all over the place. With chapter headings like "wardrobe", "liquid", "neighbor" and "liquid Bruce Lee" it is not surprising to wonder how to connect the dots. But as I kept reading and listening to what Gibbons had to say, I began to appreciate the apparent non-structure of the book. As the sub-title of his book suggests, *The Monkey and the Fish* is about "liquid leadership." As Gibbons writes in the preface, "The problem is that formulas and one-size-fits-all programs so often do



¹Margaret Oines offers this overview of the opening parable in her review of this book at www.faithfulreader.com.

more harm than good. We need to learn to adapt, to be fluid – or liquid....” (19) “This book is about water, learning to adapt and become all things to all people.” (27)

This book challenged a number of the presuppositions I have had about the church and its mission in the world. And I believe I am not alone. For example, when I was involved in church planting and even transitioning an established church, one of the things we did was creating a target group to focus on reaching. We had learned the homogeneous principle popularised by Donald McGavran. We anticipated reaching people who were like us. We wanted our churches to grow, and to grow big. But what happens when we measure our success simply by the numbers. Gibbons challenges

**Our task as the church is be water.
To flow.
Not crash.**

us to come to grips with a different set of questions: “Were people’s lives any different? Were the city and community really being transformed? Were hurt and pain really being addressed with the marginalized in our community?....Were we forging real and stronger relationships with people who are not like us?” (61) The end goal is not size; what really matters is lives transformed!

My favorite chapter in Gibbons’ book is *Liquid Bruce Lee*. As church leaders we cannot afford to be unwilling to adapt to the changing times and cultures around us. In fact, as he points out: “complacency is lethal.” (90) While we are urged to honour the past, we must be willing to fuel the fringe. Referring to the lessons learned in

the kiwi industry in New Zealand, “the church needs to look different, feel different, sound different, be different to the people in our churches and the people we hope will be in our churches.

Same mission.
Same dream.
Same truth.
Same message.
Yet new forms.
New languages.
New containers.
New priests and messengers.
New relationships.” (92)

The same is true with the roles for church leaders today. They are rapidly changing. Gibbons suggests that some of the major shifts are from consumerism to cause-ism, from pastor to social entrepreneur, and from developing paths or systems to discovering rhythms. (93-105) The church of the future will need to be, among others things, more adaptive, messy, holistic, and artful. Or else die. No cookie cutter solutions. Each church will have to take on a shape peculiar to its situation.

This book is a must read for church leaders everywhere. But expect to be challenged in your thinking. Gibbons asks uncomfortable questions of church leaders – but the kinds of questions we need to hear – and heed! The bonus in this book is an appendix of practical next steps. With discussion questions and suggestions based on each of the chapters, this appendix provides an excellent launching pad to transition a church into becoming third culture.

But as Gibbons cautions:

“Be water, my friend.”

