

William A. Dyrness. *A Primer on Christian Worship: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We Can Go* (The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. 154 pages. \$18.

William Dyrness has provided for the church and the academy an accessible, readable introduction to Christian worship that explains its history, describes the current state of affairs, and offers suggestions for the continuing task of renewing worship. His perspective as a theologian who has delved into matters of aesthetics and art history enhances his treatment of the development of Christian worship over the centuries and informs his opinions about where worshiping assemblies might go from here.

Dyrness states two explicit goals. First, he seeks to make the vibrant (and sometimes volatile) conversations about worship that are everywhere available to a broader audience. Second, Dyrness wants “to awaken the average worshiper to the importance of these issues...that we all might become more faithful and biblical worshipers (ix).” He succeeds at both of these goals, and more.

Several foundational assumptions undergird Dyrness' work. First, the biblical narrative is a chief source for what people do in worship; whatever practices we humans develop, they are in response to God's initiative. Second, worship must be considered within a framework of cultural analysis. Third, it is practices that bind Christians over time and space, and by studying those practices, we can trace the historical and theological developments behind them. Furthermore, those practices emerge in large part from the songs, litanies, and confessions of scripture. The story of God and God's people is, in large part, the story of the people's responses to God through worship.

Dyrness states his fundamental approach quite clearly when he explains that he intends to show that the differences in Christian worship “are more about culture – what I will call ‘style’ – than about historical and theological substance, though implications for these are not absent altogether (13).” That is, differences in worship, he argues, reflect attempts to contextualize worship. This approach is a compelling one, and I have found that it enables students to understand both historical and contemporary forms of worship in relation to one another, rather than as utterly separate and discrete entities.

In just two chapters, he manages to paint, with broad brush strokes, a picture of the evolution of Christian worship, first describing the middle ages and the Reformation, then spanning from the post-Reformation period until the present. While the historians among us may find this too general of a treatment, I have found his approach to be quite helpful for an introductory seminary course in worship, where historical, theological, and practical matters must all be addressed. This feature also makes the *Primer* an approachable and inviting text for study groups within congregations.

In subsequent chapters, Dyrness discusses the Trinitarian nature of worship as well as what he calls the “narrative shape” of worship, the classic four-fold shape that has come to be recognized as an ecumenically-shared pattern: gathering, word, Eucharist, and sending. He presents this pattern, or narrative, however, with an eye toward contextual issues – the pluralism of contemporary culture, the ever-increasing focus on materialism, and the accelerating pace of life. Furthermore, he points to fundamental human questions, like “Who am I? To whom do I belong? And what do I live for?” as significant questions that inform worship. In worship, the narratives of worshipers are woven together with the narrative of grace.

In the penultimate chapter, Dyrness discusses the eschatological nature of worship, a key perspective for the 21st church. Naming the “lessons of worship,” he asserts that by practicing what we believe -- through hospitality, reconciliation, love, lament, new community, and the honoring of creation – we anticipate the coming reign of God and are thus shaped for the life of discipleship.

The book’s final chapter points the church toward renewed worship. Not surprisingly, Dyrness advises us to pay attention to culture and to attend to the aesthetic dimensions of worship. “The question,” he says, “...is not whether worship should be visual or creative, but *how* the visual dimension of current practices enhances or impedes worship, especially for a generation raised in a visual culture (148).” He urges us to “release the poets,” “to once again make the space of the church into a center of creativity and imagination (149).” As he did at the beginning of the book, he does again at the end, reminding us that in all of our worship, we celebrate the new creation that is on its way.

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