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# A Primer on Christian Worship

David Schnasa Jacobsen

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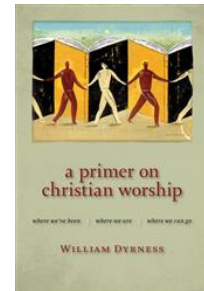
## Book Review

### **A Primer on Christian Worship**

William A. Dyrness

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009

It is probably a healthy sign for any discipline that its issues, topics, and problems are of sufficient interest to prompt scholars from other disciplines to look over the fence into someone else's field as a way of reframing issues. Dyrness, professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, is no liturgist. Nonetheless, his fresh way of looking at issues in worship adds a new vision for thinking about the practices of worship in Roman Catholic, mainline and evangelical churches both historically and theologically.



This is not to say that Dyrness is a dilettante on the subject. He has actually published other works on worship, such as *Senses of the Soul: Art and the Visual in Worship*. His *Primer* actually shows some familiarity with the liturgical scholarship, like the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” theology as it pertains to liturgical theology on the one hand and the post-liturgical, reflective task of systematics on the other. What is more interesting, however, is that Dyrness’ work as a professor of theology and culture equips him with the tools of the social scientist, some of which he brings to bear in this book. This opens up new vistas when he reflects on the history of liturgy and the social shape of earlier liturgical practices. Dyrness demonstrates that he understands the astounding liturgical variety and conflicts we face today: seeker-sensitive, contemporary, blended, emergent church, or liturgical-renewal church. His take on the gospel/culture relation is insightful and refreshing in that it doesn’t allow him to capitulate to culture, nor to retreat into the liturgical enclaves of traditional purists. Liturgical scholars, pastors, and worship leaders/committees can all benefit from his wisdom and unique vantage point. This book fills an important niche that keeps theology front and center while appreciating liturgical diversity and refusing to cut off dialogue in the midst of “worship wars.”

This does not mean the book is without shortcomings. The split between Catholic and Reformation (read: Reformed) views is a bit too breezy and neat. Although there is a brief section on Luther, Dyrness fails to take advantage of the Lutheran tradition’s unique willingness to receive the tradition gladly and yet “affirm the ordinary.” This note is left out on the way to placing worship in a Trinitarian vision that includes the deification of the worshipping community. Dyrness would have shown a greater historical range to match his careful contemporary analysis if he would have included this key part of the Lutheran

vision: worship is not always about a Protestant “re-ordering.” It sometimes affirms creation, and “lets God be God.”

Still, this book has much to commend it. Dryness’ Trinitarian approach to worship is helpful. The way he talks about Christian practices in worship as windows to theological claims is useful. He allows us to embrace the tradition with eyes wide open to the very different ways that tradition can be honoured in contemporary churches. I hope this book is not just well received, but widely used.

David Schnasa Jacobsen  
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada