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Beyond the worship wars: building vital and faithful worship

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**Beyond the Worship Wars:
Building Vital and Faithful Worship**

Thomas G. Long

Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute, 2001.

110 pages, \$23.50 Softcover

Few parish pastors and laypeople would be surprised to learn that worship has become a battleground of late. Tom Long of Emory University's Candler School of Theology takes up the conflict by offering his own view of the problem and a possible way through it. Although this book does not break much new ground (its disarming almost home-spun style sometimes conceals the depth of reflection), it does ask all the right theological questions of people on both sides of the worship wars. For that reason it should be read by lay and clergy together, not so much to provide all the answers, but to provoke the right questions.

The primary conflict in Long's view is that between the "Hippolytus Force" and the "Willow Creek Force".

The Hippolytus Force is represented by those who desire to reclaim the traditions of early Church worship (Hippolytus being the third-century Roman Bishop who provides us with perhaps the earliest example of a eucharistic prayer). This liturgical renewal, says Long, began with the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, and continued in the 1970's and beyond with a startling ecumenical convergence among mainline Protestants and Catholics in the revision of liturgies and hymnbooks as well as in an emphasis on the use of lectionaries, sacramental renewal, and a deepening of the connection between Word and Table. The driving vision, according to Long, is an order of church worship that reflects the beauty and theological depth of a unified Christian tradition.

By contrast, the Willow Creek Force is that which seeks to make worship less traditional and more contemporary. Here the issue is relevance and cultural familiarity. Its tendencies play themselves out through issues like music selection (especially the use of praise choruses), informality in worship order, the use of drama, and an over-all casual ambience. Willow Creek, of course, refers to the famous seeker-oriented worship service of a church in suburban Chicago. Whether in big or small ways, the Willow Creek Force has influenced many of the worship practices of churches today. The fact

that many such services are also better attended has not gone unnoticed either.

In reality, the contending forces are certainly more complex, as Long acknowledges. Not a few churches either split two services, say an early informal service for younger parishioners and a more formal traditional service for the older crowd, or try to blend the two worship styles with a juxtaposition of formal liturgy with informal pastoral or musical leadership. The point is, however, not that we just find ways to split the difference, but that we know the right questions to ask when these conflicts in worship style bubble to the surface in congregational life. To that end, Long's book is most useful. If the tendency of the Hippolytus Force is to forget that worship is not just the church's rite (as if it could choose to be a closed, private club with its own liturgical nomenclature) but a place of public hospitality, then somehow our present context worship practices need to take account of that cultural reality. By the same token, if the tendency of the Willow Creek Force is to forget that there is a depth to Christian faith and discipleship (to trade, as it were, transcendence for a personal feeling of relevance or intimacy), then our attempts to make worship more public need to be grounded in something "Other" than ourselves.

Please notice the nature of Long's arguments. In the end, the issues around Hippolytus vs. Willow Creek are emphatically not about taste and aesthetics. Too often proponents of both forces end up arguing their case as if the issue were really what is culturally "high-minded" and what is "relevant". The underlying issues, says Long, are really theological. To that end, Long proposes nine criteria of churches that have "vital and faithful worship". Having seen these criteria in action in many churches, Long offers living examples of what he's talking about.

Naturally, the book has some problems. The high, transcendent God of reformed theology is not nearly enough grounded in the God-for-us disclosed in the cross. In fact, it is that Christological element which would deepen his theological critique of both sides. Furthermore, although Long recognizes that traditionalism has more than one face (for some congregants "traditional" worship has nothing to do with Hippolytus and everything to do with nineteenth-century hymnody), his description of the conflict would benefit from a little more nuance.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that many clergy and laity will recognize themselves in the pages of Long's book. Yet they will see themselves not only in the trenches of the battlefield, but also in the irenic moments where, sometimes despite ourselves, we manage to manifest the reconciliation with which Christ has gifted God's worshipping people already. If Long's trenchant questions can provoke this much among us it, it will have done more than its part for peace.

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**Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory:
Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue**

Bruce T. Morrill

Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000

212 pages. \$25.26 Softcover

Within the field of liturgical theology, the category of *anamnesis* or remembrance has been quite crucial. Certainly much of the renewed interest in Eucharistic prayers since the beginning of the liturgical renewal movement has been the result of a greater emphasis on rendering the past of salvation history present in *anamnesis*. Author Bruce Morrill, however, is not content to let *anamnesis* be devoid of ethical content. By drawing together the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz and the liturgical theology of Alexander Schmemmann, Morrill hopes to show that the category of Eucharistic *anamnesis* can be deepened in ways that unite worship and the shape of Christian life in the world.

From the Roman Catholic theologian Metz, Morrill highlights a political theology centered on the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ. Such a memory, an *anamnesis*, is capable of pulling the placid bourgeois church more deeply into the world's suffering through a Christology of imitation. To be sure, this dangerous memory requires the help of disruptive narratives of apocalyptic eschatology and the mysticism of prayer and (sacramental) symbol to sustain it against the middle-class world. Precisely here Morrill finds a place for liturgical