

One New Book for the Preacher

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BEYOND THE WORSHIP WARS: BUILDING VITAL AND FAITHFUL WORSHIP by Thomas G. Long. Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute, 2001. 119 pages.

“Beware: this book will change your church as it enlivens your worship,” writes Marva Dawn in her enthusiastic review on the back cover of Tom Long’s newest book. Her warning is one to be heeded. Long challenges readers from a variety of worship traditions to examine their practice of worship, and perhaps even to venture into that frightening and sometimes unknown territory of change.

Long begins by addressing the current “worship wars” that are occurring as churches try to choose between a traditional approach and a more contemporary one:

Indeed, the pressure to engage in newer forms of worship has generated tension, at least to some degree, in virtually every congregation in America. . . . Some people in the congregation wish that worship were more immediately relevant, more exciting, more dramatic, more casual, louder, more spontaneous, and more fun, while others wish it were quieter, more reverent, more traditional, more ordered, and more dignified – and no one is completely satisfied. In other churches, what is now being called “worship warfare” . . . has broken out with the usual round of casualties that serious church conflict generates. In still other congregations there is an uneasy balkanized truce – “You contemporary folk can have the 9 A.M. service, and you traditional people can have the 11 A.M.” (2)

Long believes that these worship wars are being caused by two distinctly different forces. The “Hippolytus force” (named for the author of the earliest known complete Eucharistic prayer) favors a style of worship based on the recovery and “rediscovery” of the beauty of the liturgy and a reconnection with the church throughout the ages. The “Willow Creek force” (named for the well-known seeker church in South Barrington, Illinois) favors a style of worship based on a “seeker-oriented” approach that reaches out to “human beings hungrily searching in their own ways for spiritual experiences in very personal, immediate, often unconventional and practical ways” (6). Long acknowledges the strengths of both forces, while claiming that, in the end, each falls short of embodying a full and faithful worship.

Believing that a “third way” of doing worship must exist, Long searched for churches that had found a way to incorporate vitality, depth, and mystery in worship without necessarily choosing sides:

What I was looking for . . . were congregations that had created a new thing in the earth—a service of worship completely attuned to the American cultural moment but also fully congruent with the great worship tradition of the Christian church; a service that attracts young people and seekers and

the curious and those who are hungry for a spiritual encounter, but that does so by beckoning people to the deep and refreshing pool of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it has been understood historically in the church. (12)

In his search, he found a representative group of about twenty congregations. He worshiped with them, visited with their members, spoke with their leadership, and began to discern what made worship in these places distinct. Though these churches differed in almost every way, they held some important things in common. In the remainder of the book, Long discusses in depth nine characteristics that make these congregations “vital and faithful churches.”

Long begins by asking, “Why do people come to worship?” To help answer this question, he addresses a long list of issues such as belonging, community, language, theology, mission, hospitality, music, architecture, leadership, fellowship, and celebration. In the process, Long identifies characteristics of vital and faithful churches. These congregations, he claims, make room, somewhere in worship, for the experience of mystery; make planned and concerted efforts to show hospitality to the stranger; recover and make visible the sense of drama inherent in Christian worship; emphasize congregational music that is both excellent and eclectic in style and genre; creatively adapt the space and environment of worship; forge a strong connection between worship and local mission—a connection expressed in every aspect of the worship service; maintain a relatively stable order of service and a significant repertoire of worship elements and responses that the congregation knows by heart; move to a joyous festival experience toward the end of the worship service; and have strong, charismatic pastors as worship leaders (13).

Long explores these characteristics with his typically engaging, anecdotal style. His words are wise, insightful, and practical. He challenges those of us who lead worship on a weekly basis to examine our worship, to push our congregations to explore alternatives to “the way we have always done it,” and to question why we do what we do. He draws upon leaders in the world of worship and theology such as James White, Marva Dawn, Tex Sample, Brian Wren, and Donald Miller, telling their stories as well as his own, and he invites readers to encounter worship in spirit and in truth, whatever their context might be. Long clearly loves the church and hopes that worship can be for all a “beacon . . . guiding us toward worship that attracts people in our society to an encounter with God in Christ” (13).

He ends this brief but illuminating book with an epilogue titled, “Can Revitalized Worship Happen Here?” Believing that vital and faithful worship *can* happen anywhere, he offers practical insights into how leaders should approach worship renewal in their own contexts. This book is a must read for all who desire to lead their congregations in a faithful experience that is welcoming to all and true to the Triune God we worship and serve. Those who lead will be encouraged by Long’s final words: “May God richly bless you as you seek to enable your congregation to worship more faithfully and to find itself ‘lost in wonder, love and praise’” (110).