

The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship. By Gordon W. Lathrop. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2012. Pages, xix + 219. Hardcover, \$49.00. ISBN 978-0-8006-9852-2.

After several decades of influential work in liturgical theology, Gordon Lathrop has reengaged the discipline in which he earned his doctorate, biblical studies, producing a remarkable study that offers a detailed account of how the canonical Gospels function as “documents of reform” directed toward ancient liturgical assemblies (ix).

The book seeks to address at least two related contemporary problems: the dearth of serious scholarly dialog between recent liturgical and critical biblical study, and the tendency of much current liturgical and homiletical practice to carry on as if critical biblical scholarship simply does not exist. Lathrop’s new book may be the most comprehensive and hopeful response yet to these problems.

Lathrop finds theological promise where modernity sometimes saw liabilities: the distance between the historical Jesus and the content of the Church’s worship is here seen as a fertile space for a theological dialog (between the “Jesus-then” of history and “Jesus-now” present in the assembly) into which the gospel writers themselves invite assemblies; the non-harmonizable character of the four gospels is underscored as a welcome multivocality that serves as a check against various fundamentalisms, allowing the four voices to be honored as witnesses possessing their own agency (a primary motif is Ireneaus’ image of the gospels as the four beasts around the throne in Revelation).

The book is divided into two parts. The first and longer part (primarily an exercise in biblical scholarship) locates the Gospels in their original cultural, ecclesial, and liturgical contexts, especially highlighting the reforming intentions of each Gospel. The second and shorter part (primarily an exercise in liturgical theology) considers the implications of that reforming trajectory for current liturgical practice.

The first part of the book is especially ambitious. The first chapter, "Beginnings: Assemblies, 'Gospel,' Gospels," lays the foundation for the project. It begins by arguing that while liturgical theology in the past century was rightly critiqued for an eager "panliturgism" (5) that naively read liturgical data into scripture, the relationship with liturgical assembly (itself here newly considered) is essential to the character of the gospels, as all four accounts from the beginning "presume . . . an assembly . . . as part of their very genre" (9). The chapter argues that the use of the concept of *gospel* itself in scripture introduces a reforming intent into Christian gatherings by way of a critical contrast with the ritual, mythic, and ethical dimensions of the so-called "gospels" of the Roman imperial cult. Lathrop sees the gospels as taking up and adapting the meeting-reforming projects of Paul after his death, most directly in Mark. In the second chapter, "The Gospels and Meal Meetings," Lathrop plunges into the dilemmas posed by questions surrounding eucharistic origins, including the emergence of the motif of the death of Christ. While noting the currently "inaccessible" character of many early developments, Lathrop offers one "possible historical reconstruction" of how the motif assumed prominence in early Christian meals, and he begins to sketch how such an evolution (quite apart from a Last Supper "institution") could be conceived faithfully and theologically while maintaining a forthright honesty about recent critical scholarship (55). The following three chapters (on Mark; Matthew and Luke; and John) are individually nearly weighty enough to function as freestanding commentaries themselves. The chapters identify how the particular theological concerns and liturgical reform agendas of each gospel are advanced through distinctive literary techniques and theological motifs. Each chapter in this first part is concluded with a substantial paragraph of italicized text made up almost entirely of questions, inviting readers into a dialog between the claims of the chapter and current liturgical practice, and, even more directly, between current liturgical practice and the gospels themselves. Indeed, the questions raised by Lathrop's biblical study (many of which are by no means neatly solved here) call for serious engagement from scholarly and ecclesial communities.

The second part is comprised of three chapters that address current liturgical concerns: word, sacrament, and assembly; leadership; and the future of the liturgical renewal movement. These chapters allow Lathrop to undergird with biblical scholarship some themes of his earlier books (e.g. a case for strong leadership together with a sharp critique of hierarchy) and to pose provocative new questions (e.g. have the words of the so-called institutional narrative "simply become so formulaic as to lose their reforming power"?) (171). The final chapter invites the liturgical guild into

renewal through a reengagement with critical biblical study. Such a partnership between biblical and liturgical guilds might find common ground in the current post-modern attention to diversity in ancient sources. And the two disciplines might mutually benefit from the challenge of holding together "critical biblical study and the recovered experience of mystery in Christian assembly" (197).

Lathrop's 1984 vice presidential address to the North American Academy of Liturgy invited liturgical scholars and practitioners into "a rebirth of biblical images." This present work broadens the invitation into a call for a deeper rapprochement between critical biblical studies and liturgical studies. The book is already a profound down payment on the scholarly and theological riches that such a project can produce, and may well spark a stimulating conversation in the biblical studies guild, in addition to liturgical studies. The most in-depth engagement with the book will likely occur in upper level courses on bible and/or liturgy, but ample sections will be fruitfully engaged in introductory courses on worship or New Testament. Those facing the weekly task of preaching and worship leadership may have the most to gain: in the book's examination of the intent of the gospels to renew Christian assemblies, those who preach on those gospels and serve at its meal fellowships will find steady wisdom born of careful biblical study as well as the renewal that accompanies the wonder of genuine discovery.

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