

### III. Ministerial Studies

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*The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship*, by Gordon W. Lathrop. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 219 pp. \$49.00. ISBN 9780-8006-9852-2.

Ministers who lead worship on Sundays in the first part of the twenty-first century probably wonder from time to time what worship was like in the so-called "early church." There is simply no way to know, of course, in spite of several naïve attempts that have been made over the years, some by well-meaning scholars. In Lathrop's latest volume on worship (he is the author of the previously published trilogy: *Holy Things, Holy People, and Holy Ground*), he takes a different approach to the New Testament. The title of the book is a play on words, as he both explores what the four Gospels have to say *about* worship and how they are used *in* worship.

Lathrop rightly believes that one of the biggest problems in reading the Gospels is focusing on the historical "Jesus-then" as opposed to

the "Jesus-now" of the era when the four accounts were written down, some thirty to ninety years after Jesus' ministry. Employing what he calls "liturgical criticism" (p. xii), he argues that "the four Gospels all presume a community, an assembly, a meeting, as part of what they are, as part of their very genre" (p. 9). In John's Gospel, for instance, chapter 20 ends with two Sunday stories in which the risen Christ shows up. Or in Luke's final chapter, the risen Christ breaks bread with his followers who recognize him in the meal. For Lathrop, this is a peek into the early Christian movement and what they believed about Sunday worship.

But his exploration of the four Gospels goes much deeper than that. He argues that in the Synoptic accounts stories that happen in *the house* were "intended by the author to evoke the house churches and small gatherings where the book would be primarily read" (p. 61). In Mark's Gospel, for example, it is in the house that the sick are healed and begin to serve, where the parables are

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explained, sinners are welcomed, the hungry are fed, and where children are accepted (pp. 68-91). Although John's account does not highlight house meetings, there the "assembly" serves a similar function, albeit predominantly in the latter half of the Gospel. But according to Lathrop, even early on in the Fourth Gospel when Jesus converses with a single individual (Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman), the second person singular pronouns often give way to second person plural ("You [plural] must be born again."), thus evoking those early "paleo-Christian" gatherings.



story of lowering the paralyzed man through a partially removed roof and on recent archaeological finds, he notes that the remodeling of early gathering spaces was primarily about making room for more people at the table (p. 162). And in a brilliant treatment of Mark's Gospel, he argues quite convincingly that the very center of that work is the welcoming of children, not because they can be cute and precocious but because despite their being less than second class citizens in the ancient world, they were welcomed warmly by Jesus (pp. 75-87).

Having explored what the Gospels imply about early Christian worship, Lathrop then moves toward the implications for worship renewal in our day. The nuggets here (as well as a few that appear earlier in the book) are rich indeed. For example, he writes, "If we are not careful, however, even though they are called 'churches,' they can become highly boundaried groups with domineering leaders, practices centered in our own identity, reinforcing what we already thought, and prayers primarily for ourselves" (p. 160). Or again, when commenting on the

This is a book to assist with our reading of the Gospels and with our assessment of current worship practices. Like a lot of theology books these days, it is pricey; but unlike some, it is worth the money. Also, while the scholarship may be a bit deep at times, it is a refreshing alternative to simplistic approaches and trends. Church staffs that plan worship together will find this a great study.

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