

BOOK NOTE: *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the gospel shape our practice* by Bryan Chapell, Baker Academic, 2009

Bryan Chapell, president of Covenant Theological Seminary, adds to his extensive repertoire of books with what amounts to be a textbook for planning worship. As such, it will be most useful for seminary students coming out of a broad evangelical background or others inclined simply to follow the latest trends without any reference to tradition or scriptural principles. Chapell's book provides a helpful corrective to such inclinations and if heeded, should go a large way towards providing a more uniform culture of worship in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and other conservative presbyterian bodies which lack books of common worship. At the same time, since his intended readership also appears to be a broader evangelical audience (see for instance his chapter on "Sample Worship Services," pp. 263-288), those in the reformed tradition looking for specific and sure guidance will sometimes be frustrated by Chapell's purposes in this book.

The first half of the book consists of a series of chapters outlining various liturgies in the Church's history: Medieval (Roman), Luther, Calvin, the Westminster Directory, and Modern, represented by Robert G. Rayburn's liturgical model. These chapters are concerned with the structure of worship and are filled with a large number of charts comparing and contrasting these liturgies. As such, this part of the book tends to be fairly technical and not very remarkable. But that is Chapell's point: that there is a great deal of continuity between these liturgies because each one was structured as an attempt to communicate the gospel. This in itself is an encouraging demonstration, and helps us respect the traditions we are sometimes too quick to dismiss in the name of relevance.

This section gives way to the strongest and most creative part of the book, several chapters presenting thoughtful and scriptural reasons for our worship practices. Particularly helpful are the chapters entitled, "Christ's Story," which outlines several biblical approaches to worship found in redemptive history; and "The Aspects of Christ-Centered Worship," in which Chapell lays out several of the tensions which we face as we plan and lead worship. Here we see Chapell at his best: letting the gospel be the driving force in our worship rather than secondary matters or personal preference.

A gospel focus in worship thus brings a wisdom, moderation and balance which should temper personal agendas. For instance, Chapell writes, "There are times for our souls to soar to musical heights on the melodies of Mahler, and there are times to cling to the down-to-earth goodness of 'Jesus Loves Me.' Before we complain too stridently about a chorus being repeated two or three times, we may need to re-read Psalm 136 or give thanks that we do not have to repeat the *Kyrie* twelve times as Calvin required his people at Strasbourg" (p. 140).

The second half of the book is entitled, "Gospel Worship Resources," and consists of several chapters providing worship texts from Calls to Worship to Benedictions, including a helpful little chapter on "rubrics," those short sayings which help us transition between parts of the service. These resources are all very helpful but pastors should be aware that the book still remains a text book; its layout keeps it from being a practical aid one might easily carry into the worship service itself. Included in these chapters are thoughtful considerations of scripture reading, the communion service, and of course, Christ-centered sermons.

If Chapell's intent was to write a generic worship text book for use in evangelical seminaries, he appears to have succeeded well, and *Christ-Centered Worship* will temper broad evangelical worship patterns and help bring them back to a more classical Protestant approach. This usefulness to the broader evangelical world, however, is also the book's greatest limitation for use in the Presbyterian Church in America and other conservative presbyterian bodies.

This limitation appears in several ways. On the historical front, Chapell leaps straight from the Westminster Assembly to "the Modern story," c. 1960 (the charismatic renewals, p. 69). In doing so, he has skipped crucial centuries of worship debate in the evangelical and reformed tradition. There is no mention of the Great Awakenings with their Old Light/New Light and Old School/New School differences. There is no mention of the resurgence of a more formal Protestant liturgy through the reactionary Mercersburg theology of the mid 19th century, whose influence on Reformed worship since is almost incalculable. After all, most of the worship differences in the PCA, for instance, can be traced to these debates, with some PCA congregations looking little different than revivalist Baptists in their worship and others looking almost Anglican. Now, Chapell might argue that all the critical issues facing us in worship today can be found in the earlier liturgical debates, but if so, at least some mention of this massive historical fast forward is in order.

Another way this limitation appears is that there is almost no discussion of the Regulative Principle of Worship, the distinctive mark of reformed worship. Chapell discusses it briefly in regards to the Westminster Assembly; and the idea that worship is to be guided by scripture generally is certainly present throughout the book. But nowhere does Chapell clearly advocate the Regulative Principle as the norm to which we should adhere. In his chapter on "The Components of Christ-Centered Worship," Chapell does introduce the appropriate components (note: not elements) of worship according to the New Testament worship, but there is no discussion, for instance, of the elements, circumstances and forms of worship in those terms.

Chapell instead seems to want to re-frame the discussion in terms of letting the gospel shape our worship structure and components. And given his intended audience, this may be very appropriate and a winsome way to introduce the broader evangelical community to the general principles of Regulative Principle. But those wishing for a more specific discussion of how the Regulative Principle should apply to contemporary reformed worship will not find it here. Moreover, Chapell's vaguer approach unintentionally begs the question since "letting the gospel alone shape our worship practice" is precisely what the Regulative Principle is meant to protect. Likewise, there is no chapter or discussion of baptism, one of only two New Testament sacraments and thus, obviously, an important part of Christian worship. I can only imagine that this is because there is too much disagreement on this subject in the broader evangelical world for a chapter on baptism to be useful to the purposes of this book.

Finally, there are places in which the book seems to lack a clear thesis or purpose. This is particularly true in the first chapter where one would expect it. Better are the middle chapters, especially the end of the chapter on worship components in which Chapell expresses his zeal for a gospel-centered worship which is thoughtful, relevant and beautiful. But throughout the book, the broadness of his audience appears to keep Chapell from punching home specific convictions

where he might. Most often, Chapell is commendably moderate and balanced for the sake of keeping the gospel central (e.g. his qualifications regarding his advocacy of weekly communion, pp. 291-294). And yet there are other places where he is simply vague (e.g. his discussion of drama on page 151). After all, many of the reforms of worship during the Reformation were for the very purpose of keeping the Gospel central. These reforms were specific and certain, a purifying of worship precisely to the point that Christ and the gospel would not be lost amidst the clutter which had arisen around them.

That is why I suggest that if this book is used as a text book in reformed seminaries or for officer training, that it be supplemented by other worship resources such as those by Terry Johnson, David Hall, or better yet, Hughes Oliphant Old (all of whom Chapell references). These latter authors more specifically address issues concerning proper reformed worship, and right or wrong, they come at their subject with a clear argument and purpose and provide specific examples of the way reformed worship should be conducted today. I don't always agree with or follow these men's guidance in my own worship planning, but at least I know it when I don't.

All that being said, *Christ-Centered Worship* will serve the reformed world by reintroducing and highlighting Robert Rayburn's sound approach to liturgy and worship. If PCA churches follow Rayburn's and Chapell's guidance, we should find ourselves more balanced and united in our worship culture than has often been the case. *Christ-Centered Worship* will also serve the broader evangelical world by introducing reformed principles of worship and moderating some of the less tethered approaches to worship found in our day. More importantly, worship planners in both the reformed and broader traditions will be reminded to structure and focus their services around the gospel, so that in all we do, we may indeed preach Christ and not ourselves.

Chris Hutchinson
Senior Pastor,
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Blacksburg, VA
November 6, 2009