

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

BOOK REVIEW

Michael J. Quicke. *Preaching as Worship: An Integrative Approach to Formation in Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011. 286 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0801092268.

Michael Quicke characterizes his task in terms borrowed from Lytton Strachey's description of the historian:

He will row out over the great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths to be examined with a careful curiosity (p. 13).

In this case, the “ocean” to which Quicke refers is Christian worship in all its many dimensions, while the “bucket” represents his own attempt to situate preaching in relation to such a vast backdrop. In contrast to this quite modest self-assessment, Quicke contends that many preachers have a myopic and distorted view of their own *métier*: “Hubris,” he says, “plagues the act of preaching; rightly convinced of preaching’s importance, preachers can wrongly become self-important” (p. 28). Where preachers typically think of the sermon as the single most important feature of the worship service, and therefore tend to disparage other elements of congregational liturgy, Quicke proposes a more holistic vision of worship that encompasses the whole of the church’s life and ministry: “Worship embraces vision, mission, and *everything* else, for nothing is more important than living together for God’s glory” (p. 37).

The opening section of his study is given to detailed analysis of the problem: faulty definitions of worship itself, ignorance of liturgical traditions, cultural naiveté, lack of theological vision, and the like. Quicke concludes: “Bluntly, there’s just no encounter with God” (p. 59). But rather than proposing a new set of practices or liturgical reforms, Quicke contends in Part 2,

“Toward a Bigger Picture of Worship,” that the remedy lies first in a Trinitarian vision (here based largely in the work of James Torrance) of human participation in the life of God: “Instead of preachers and worshipers relying on their own energy to truly worship, God’s initiating *power* alone makes worship possible, [as] he draws us in” (p. 78). Worship is thus the point of encounter between divine gift and human gratitude. As an expression of worship, preaching is meant to function in the same way. The author quotes with approval Christoph Schwöbel’s paraphrase of Martin Luther: “There is in the divine Trinity a pulpit as God the Father is an eternal speaker, so the Son is spoken in eternity, and the Holy Spirit is an eternal listener” (p. 86).¹ Just so, according to Quicke, “Preaching is an offering made to God by preachers, yet it simultaneously addresses the congregation on behalf of God” (p. 88). This perspective helps preachers recognize (1) that they are “worshipers first and foremost,” (2) that “preaching itself is worship,” (3) that “worship itself proclaims,” and that the purpose of preaching is both (4) to situate hearers in the context of “God’s unfolding story,” and (5) to foster “community transformation” (pp. 97–98).

Quicke contends that Scripture, both in its larger theological contours and the content of particular texts, should shape not only the Sunday sermon but the whole movement of congregational worship, of which the sermon then becomes a single integrated element. Without being wedded to any single biblical model (he cites several), he commends Russell Mitman’s five-fold pattern of “(1) gathering, (2) penitence, (3) Word, (4) offertory or Eucharist, and (5) sending or dismissal” (pp. 110–11). Of greater importance are the focus and especially the *function* of Scripture which, he contends, “not only reveals worship’s big picture but also directs how people worship because of its power

1. The original is the English translation of Luther’s comment on John 16:13 (“Whatever he hears he will speak”): “For here Christ refers to a conversation carried on in the Godhead, a conversation in which no creatures participate. He sets up a pulpit both for the speaker and for the listener. He makes the Father the Preacher and the Holy Spirit the Listener” (*Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14–16*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan et al. Luther’s Works 24. Saint Louis: Concordia, 1995, 364–65).

to mediate encounters with the Triune God” (p. 108). At this point, I would have appreciated more detailed exploration of how the mediatorial role of Scripture relates to the mediatorial role of Christ—and even more so the work of the Holy Spirit—in the present moment. This is important for the question of “who does what?” in liturgy: how does it work, and what does it look like when Scripture, or the Spirit of God, directs worship? If our worship really is God-directed (in both transitive and intransitive senses) how does liturgy or preaching serve to bring about the things of which they speak?

In practical terms, Quicke commends what he calls “best past practices” (p. 122) of the Christian church, including the liturgical calendar and (with some reservation) the lectionary cycle, which he believes can orient congregations to the full scope of Christ’s work and offer a framework for planning Sunday worship. Other vital resources include the personal spirituality of congregational leaders and the wide diversity of creative gifts available within the congregation itself. A particularly critical aspect of Quicke’s argument is the place of community formation. While acknowledging the danger of confusing faith communities with the physical structures in which they meet, he takes the concept of church as “God’s building” as a governing metaphor. Methodologically, he borrows from George Lindbeck the idea of worship as the church’s characteristic language and culture, applying this principle in terms of both “inward” dynamics (formation of the community around teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer, based on Acts 2:42–47) and outwardly-focused characteristics of mission and service. But if the church is indeed “God’s building work” (p. 140), is God’s role limited to that of designer and architect, leaving the bulk of construction for leaders and members of the congregation to accomplish? Notwithstanding previous attention to the Trinitarian dynamics of Christian worship, Quicke’s extended treatment of “Dynamics of Congregational Formation” (p. 145) creates this impression.

The role of the preacher is set out more fully in chapter 9, “Integrating Elements of Community Formation,” where Quicke discusses four stages of faith development (initiation,

integration, character development, and missional living) in relation to congregational worship and preaching. Different types of sermon, evidently, are appropriate to each stage, from evangelistic proclamation to liturgical or historical instruction, pastoral admonition, and prophetic address that relates Christian life to the contemporary world. Discussion of baptism and the Lord's Supper in regard to the first two stages invokes the age-old question of the relationship between verbal proclamation and symbolic action (or sermon and sacrament), much as the more contemporary challenge of musical styles comes up for debate in relation to the development of Christian character. Notwithstanding the fact that he is tackling many complex issues at once, as Quicke readily acknowledges, such difficulties could be alleviated somewhat by further attention to the relationship between human and divine agency in gathered worship, preaching, or congregational growth. Even more helpful might be a focused discussion of the nature of the church: there needs to be some acknowledgment of what is at stake in trying to integrate a Reformed understanding of the church as constituted by the preaching of God's Word, or a pietist vision of personal conversion and discipleship directly sustained by the Holy Spirit, with a more sacramental vision of liturgical community, to say nothing of Christian responsibility for public and political action (i.e., "mission"). Since all four models are in play here (perhaps others as well), competing assumptions about the goals of discipleship and the nature of the church will undermine the kind of integrative project that Quicke has in mind unless they can be explicitly subsumed within a larger purpose or overarching vision of Christian identity.

Part 3 of this study, "A New Process," discusses preaching in relation to the different elements of what Quicke calls the "Worship Swim," by which he means a process of total immersion in worship (and proclamation) initiated by and responding to the triune God. The stages in this process are:

- Stage 1: Commit to Worship
- Stage 2: Let Scripture shape the sermon for gathered worship
- Stage 3: Design the sermon
- Stage 4: Help shape gathered worship

Stage 5: Deliver the sermon and lead worship

Stage 6: Evaluate the outcomes

Expanding on the first of these, Quicke describes spiritual qualities (thankfulness, awe, humility, prayerfulness, love, care, reverential wonder) as well as theological and practical principles (Trinitarian theology, primacy of worship as directed by Scripture, liturgical structure, community formation, choice of music, developing core values) that commitment to worship implies. He suggests that stages 2 and 3 may involve blogging and engagement with lectionary resources, but the key principle is integration of preaching within biblically-patterned worship: “Preachers should ensure that the preached Word is integrated with every other part of gathered worship and that the structure and content of the whole is directed by Scripture” (p. 224). In terms of shaping and leading worship, including the sermon (stages 4 and 5), Quicke offers a range of practical suggestions with regard to prayer and music choices in particular. For the final stage in this process, he encourages evaluation in terms both of practical details and of seeking to discern signs of growth and transformation within the congregation (e.g., honesty before God, financial generosity, maturity of character, participation in mission, etc.).

This conclusion brings out more clearly a tension that (as the foregoing comments indicate) is at least implicit throughout much of the study. Quicke’s primary thesis is that preaching and worship assume their proper dimensions only when they are seen as part of a larger theological trajectory that begins and ends with God. He encourages readers to look for indications of God at work within the life of their church. Yet by and large, the specific contours or hallmarks of divine action remain largely unexplored: most of the discussion centers around human action, and the many tasks and aspects of congregational vitality for which we ourselves are responsible. The proposals contained in this study are consistently judicious, measured, and faithful to the task of integrating preaching within a larger vision of worship—and thus make a valuable contribution in their own right. But in addition, if we are to “keep in step with the Spirit”

(Gal 5:25, TNIV), specifically in the area of what Quicke calls “big picture worship,” we must be able not only to recognize the signs of the Spirit at work in our midst, but also to conform ourselves to, even cooperate with God’s active purpose in all the practical considerations of which Quicke speaks. The operative question, in other words, is not just one of appropriate Christian responsibility in congregational leadership, or even of discerning the Trinitarian shape of worship, but also of discovering in greater detail how God actually works in our midst to enable and effect this kind of change. Given, as Quicke argues at the outset, that worship arises out of an encounter with God, knowing more of what that encounter looks like in a corporate setting, how it takes place, and especially how to be guided by it, are at least as important as coordination and cooperation among members of a congregation or their leadership team. Again, the answers to such questions from the perspective of Reformed, or sacramental, or Pentecostal spirituality (to name only three of many possibilities) are quite different.

This book is part of a larger trend (associated in particular with Robert E. Webber and the “ancient future church” movement) whereby the current evangelical generation seeks to appropriate the liturgical resources of the sacramental tradition. Pastors and preachers will find here a thoughtful evangelical “critique from within” that is based on the integration of these different perspectives. Rather than simply providing a list of things for already overworked worship leaders to do differently, this work is most valuable for its clear reminder of the larger theological context that makes such integration possible.

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