Nicholas Wolterstorff


The author of this innovative study is well-known as a distinguished Christian philosopher in the Reformed tradition. Wolterstorff served at Calvin College in Grand Rapids for three decades and subsequently at the Universities of Virginia and Yale. The present book is based on his Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology, given at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, in 2013. Here Wolterstorff explores the theology of the liturgy from the point of view of what it tells us about the God who is worshipped therein. The old adage _Lex orandi lex credendi_ (the law of praying is the law of believing) suggests that the liturgy is potentially a fruitful source of Christian doctrine in several areas. One area that Wolterstorff flags up but does not himself pursue is Christology: there is a rich implicit Christology in the church’s liturgical texts. He also points out that the liturgy is a source of theological anthropology: what do adoration, confession, the reception of grace-filled gifts and the act of being solemnly blessed, for example, tell us about our human condition as Christians _in via_? An area that he does not mention is ecclesiology: what does the liturgy tell us about the church that celebrates it? In the liturgy the church is not talking about itself; that would be inappropriate, almost sacrilegious, because in worship the church’s focus is on God in an attitude of selfless adoration; there is no room for ecclesial self-consciousness or reflexivity there. But liturgy does reveal, in an oblique and indirect way, much of a doctrinal nature about the church that is worshipping. Wolterstorff endorses Alexander Schmemann’s affirmation that the liturgy is the place where the church is ‘actualized’, and the Reformed theologian J.J. Von Allmen’s view of liturgy as the ‘epiphany’ of the church. Wolterstorff adds, however, that we can only affirm those things because God is at work in the church and in its worship (p. 12). If the liturgy is an ‘actualization’ and ‘epiphany’ of the church, its clearest manifestation, it must certainly be a source of theological insight about the church. Wolterstorff’s study, however, is confined to what the texts and actions of the liturgy tell us, explicitly or implicitly, about God. Drawing out the theological affirmations and implications of the liturgy is what he understands by ‘Liturgical Theology’.

Wolterstorff’s strong preference is for the traditional liturgies. They have, he believes, ‘a depth, a richness, a beauty’ that contemporary liturgies lack because the latter ‘strip elements out of the traditional liturgies, reduce the imagery, make the language chatty and prosaic ... There remains only a faint echo of the enormous devotion and creativity that the early church poured into its liturgies’ (p. 20).
Liturgy is ‘scripted’ worship, but the script is for a performance that involves not only speech but action: there are rubrics to be followed, as well as texts to be spoken. Liturgical acts such as kneeling, crossing oneself, processing, singing, closing the eyes, receiving bread and wine, pouring water, and many more, are also eloquent of our disposition in worship and therefore of the object of that disposition. ‘The deepest presupposition of the Christian liturgy is that God is worship-worthy’ (p. 23; since worship means to ascribe worth, this is a tautology). In Christian worship ‘we acknowledge the unsurpassable excellence of God’ (p. 24). But worship in Christian experience is somehow warmer than that and needs to be qualified as adoration. God is the highest object of our adoration. To adore is a mode of love, specifically love as attraction (p. 25). The worshipping attitude of mind, heart and body is made up of elements of awe, reverence and gratitude (p. 26). Awe is directed towards the glory of God in creation and redemption. Reverence is our response in the face of the holiness, the purity and perfection of God. Gratitude is evoked by God’s love for humankind.

Among Wolterstorff’s main contentions are the following points. 1. If liturgy is to be the actualisation or the epiphany of the church, it has to be understood as something enacted or performed, not merely spoken. Liturgy is an action as well as a discourse and is made up of acts as well as words and of symbols as well as sounds. 2. If liturgy is to be the actualisation or the epiphany of the church, it has to understood as the ordered worship that is enacted, performed or carried out by the church corporately, not merely by individual members of the congregation speaking and acting in unison. The worship of an individual cannot reveal the nature of the church. Only an act of the church as such and the speech of the church as such can reveal the nature and purpose of the church. 3. The Holy Spirit is at work in the ordered praise and prayer of the church. The Spirit of Christ enables the liturgy to reveal Christ. Christ is present and at work in the liturgical worship of the church as his body. 4. Liturgy is enacted not primarily to satisfy human needs or to express human longings, though these are not excluded. ‘Many members of the church think of it as a service organization catering to their religious or spiritual needs or desires. The clergy enact the liturgy for the benefit of those who find it spiritually nourishing and edifying’ (p. 11). In truth, however, liturgy is done for God. 5. Furthermore, the liturgy is not carried out by the clergy on behalf of a liturgically unqualified congregation; it is carried out by the gathered Christian community, celebrating as one body, people and priest together. 6. Liturgy is an obligatory event. It is, as the Book of Common Prayer (1662) puts it, ‘our bounden duty’. As Wolterstorff shows, some modern liturgies are coy about the ‘duty’ aspect of worship. They are happy to say that worship is a good and right and joyful thing,