

Introduction to Christian Liturgy. By Frank C. Senn. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 244 pp.

A lovely and reverent article in *The New Yorker* (“God Talk,” October 22, 2012, 73-76) celebrates the 350th birthday of *The Book of Common Prayer*. Author James Wood gives delightful and amusing illustrations of its impact. But in the end,

The words persist, but the belief they vouchsafe has long gone. A loss, one supposes—and yet, paradoxically, the words are, in the absence of belief, as richly usable as they were three hundred and fifty years ago. All at once, it seems, they are full and empty. They comfort, disappoint, haunt, irritate, disappear, linger.

Frank Senn has written an elementary introduction, an outline of concerns, and a reference work for worship leaders and planners as well as curious laity. I guess someone forgot to tell him that the liturgy peaked in 1562 and is now a thesaurus of great expressions. Is the joke on Senn? I think not.

From Senn’s storehouse of academic learning and pastoral experience he has brought forth facts large and small to give historical perspective and ecumenical breadth to issues in pastoral liturgics. He arranges the contents in eleven chapters: Liturgy—A Practical Science; History and Culture; The Principal Order of Service; The Liturgy of Time; The Church-Year Calendar; The Church Year: Advent through Lent; The Church Year: Holy Week; The Church Year: Easter and Beyond: Life Passages; The Liturgical Arts; and Participation in Worship. Each chapter addresses five questions a liturgical leader might ask.

Senn is defiantly practical while displaying an extraordinary command of sources. I am glad he has made his learning accessible to busy people, though at times he offers more and sometimes less than they might find immediately useful. He gives common practice its due as a rule (of the sharing of the peace, he says “Some communities are used to hugs”) yet at times comes down heavily with his own well-considered decisions. I was taken aback by his statement, “The High Mass with multiple liturgical roles fully sung by the ministers and the people with the assistance of a choir is the ideal form of celebration” (72). How does one call that “ideal”

without casting aspersions on the simpler liturgies of, say, my friends in Papua New Guinea? Some nuance would be helpful.

This book will be my first choice to hand to a member who expresses a desire to know more about liturgy. When you combine this text with the bibliographies at the end of each chapter, you have a great curriculum. What I missed was a more clearly Gospel-centered definition of and argument for Christian liturgy. By beginning, ending, and centering his opening explanation (3) in God's expectation that we *should* glorify God, Senn misses an opportunity to elucidate how our eighth day assemblies radically differ from all worship, Christian or other, which is done *because it ought to be done*; or is done this way *because it ought to be done* this way. For Christian faith and worship, the best *apologia* is a good *skandalon* (see 1 Corinthians 1:23). Christians run to the Lord's Supper because we do not want to miss the boat. We are glad the Crucified is raised. The Holy Spirit calls us and enlightens us and unites us with other Christians in this way, giving us—for free—the “fear and love” of God which fulfills the Sabbath commandment as no sort of observance ever will.

Senn knows the gospel; I have heard him preach. But unless we bring to the surface the friction between law and the gospel and make the gospel decisive, we risk the liturgy becoming a tourist attraction and material for comics. If a sermon is just “[a]n address on a biblical text, doctrinal loci, or ethical topic” (229) we are in big trouble. But it is not, and we are not, thanks in part to the work of practical liturgists like Senn.

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