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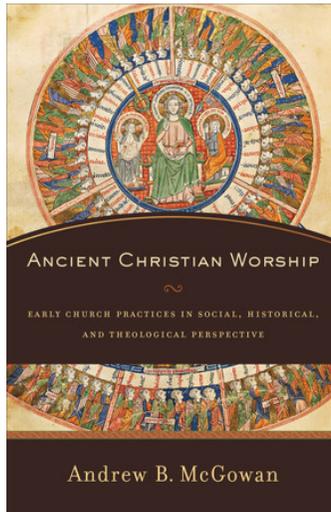
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Andrew McGowan

Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014

Pp. xiv + 298. ISBN: 978-0-8010-3152-6. \$34.99
[Hardback]. Purchase

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Andrew McGowan, dean and president of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, has provided a helpful compendium of ancient Christian worship practices. He examines meals, the word, music, initiation, prayer, and time beginning with the earliest evidence going up to not long after C.E. 400. His task is more descriptive than prescriptive. He is not seeking to recommend what ought to have been done, but rather designate what was said and done in various ancient contexts.

Although the book is called *Ancient Christian Worship*, McGowan acknowledges that the term “worship” has varied in use over time. The older senses of worship are about embodied life and ethics, the newer senses about inner life and aesthetics. McGowan rightly says, “No one in the ancient church could have asked about styles of worship” (p.4). For the purposes of this book he uses worship to mean the practices

that constitute Christian communal and ritual life. Worship thus is about bodies, spaces, objects, and words.

McGowan claims the Eucharist was characterized by diversity of meaning. Various themes such as memory, presence, celebration, sacrifice and thanksgiving are all present. If one theme trumps the others, it seems that thanksgiving is the constant theme alluded to. The meal began as an ancient Mediterranean banquet, but moved away from the actual banquet due to practical considerations.

The preaching and reading from the word were always present, but became more central around the second or third generation. According to McGowan, the more textualized community and approach to revelatory discourse was accompanied by increasing authoritative exposition of texts.

Song was a regular part of Christian worship, although there is diversity, while dance was more unpredictable. Although not a great deal is known about Graeco-Roman music generally, the music does seem to be a vehicle for the expression of thought and feelings, and the focus was typically more verbal than musical. It does seem that dancing occurred in early Christian gatherings by an account from Clement, yet dancing becomes more public and controversial in the fourth century.

“Baptism as an initiatory action was almost universal in earliest Christianity” (p.135). Although the symbol began from the assumption of complete bathing, infant baptism began to be practiced early but was not completely normalized until the 6th century. The question of who baptizes was also debated. Ignatius thought it was to be done only by bishops, while Tertullian that it was the right of all Christians.

Prayer for the first Christians involved more than forming individual words or ideas. It was a communal task as well as highly personal and many times a matter of body as well as the mind. The

erect stance with extended arms and eyes raised was a typical posture of prayer in this time period.

Although from the NT evidence, it may seem that Christians were relatively disinterested in time. McGowan argues for a development and gradual formation of Christian culture around times and seasons based on an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over all things—including time.

The need for this type of book seems so obvious, one wonders why it had not been written before. The greatest value of this book is the clustering together of topics under a tight historical banner. No longer does one need to comb through each church Father or even do word searches through Scripture, because McGowan has provided texts, analysis, and synthesis of ancient Christian worship practices.

McGowan is also careful to describe practices, and not slip into prescription. It was refreshing to read a book where the aim was to lay out the evidence and let the reader come to his or her own conclusion. All data is interpreted data, and McGowan had to do a fair bit of interpreting, but his interpretation always seemed balanced and aimed away from arguing a particular perspective. With so many books yelling, "thinks this" or "do this," McGowan's book comes nicely alongside with a quiet footstep but an authoritative stride.

This evenhandedness comes up the most in his conclusions. Regularly he notes the diversity of practice on a certain issue. For example, "The Eucharist is a field of Christian practice characterized by diversity and not just a single idea represented in bread and wine" (p.62). "At the earliest point, the opportunities for discourse and reflection were somewhat open" (p.78). "Both continuity and change are evident across the first few centuries of Christian baptismal practice" (p.182). Other citations could be given, but the sense one gets

is not a scholar who is wary of conclusions, but rather one is careful to weigh all the available evidence.

Each tradition will find uncomfortable items in this book. Statements like the following will naturally cause disturbance for some, and confirm practices for others. I am summarizing rather than quoting.

- The Eucharist was the central part of the service in the early church.
- Sunday was at a very early point the day of meeting.
- Instruments were used in services, but sparingly, and seemed to mainly serve the words.
- Early evidence is that baptism was the immersion of the whole person.
- Some of the messages seemed to be dialogical rather than monological.
- The adherence of times and seasons developed over time and was not coherent across geographical and cultural barriers.
- Dance seems to be part of services at an early stage.
- Weddings didn't become typical events for church celebration for many centuries.

Although some of these are debatable, it is clear that McGowan's aim is to survey the evidence and provide a resource for those wishing to learn about the practices of the early church. In this task he succeeded.

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