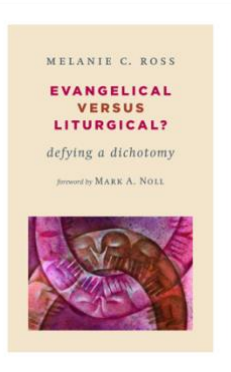


[Review] *Evangelical versus Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy*, by Melanie C. Ross



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Have you observed polarizing situations that are based more on mistrust than on facts? Have you ever had a realization that seemingly irreconcilable positions on a polarizing issue are not quite as different as we have believed—or wanted to believe? The spirit of these discoveries is at the heart of Melanie Ross’s book, in which she attempts, as the title proclaims, to defy the dichotomy of evangelical versus liturgical worship practices.

The polarizing nature of a dichotomy is the primary subject of the introduction. Ross establishes the two positions addressed throughout the book, deftly using the illustration of an inverted bell curve, or, to use a play on words, a *well curve*. The illustration demonstrates that people are often prone to gravitating toward the edges of an argument, leaving an empty void, like a deep well, where middle ground would be. Ross is clear that the idea of the well curve and the tendency toward polarization is more or less anecdotal, not a strictly quantifiable concept, despite its ubiquity in current Western culture.

As the introduction continues, Ross reveals her motivation for the book and for her attempt to defy the dichotomy. She came from a nondenominational evangelical background but is now a liturgical scholar. She confesses to often being a “translator” of terminology between the different groups she associates with. And she points out that scholarship from both sides regarding the practices of the other has been inadequate. Her quest is a middle ground of understanding, a realization that “the *well curve* between evangelical and liturgical



churches is not nearly as great as many scholars have feared” (9). Further, though some people defy the dichotomy as they practice their faith in this middle ground, Ross finds this to be more the exception than the rule, and in crafting this book she makes an impassioned statement for more of this middle ground.

The first chapter is largely concerned with the historical foundations of what we commonly regard as evangelicalism. Ross explains how the nature of the evangelical gathering in early American life gave rise to a different liturgical shape that has now become the fundamental point of difference between evangelical and liturgical Christianity. According to Ross, a transformation occurred at the time of the First Great Awakening (ca. 1725–1750) on the American frontier. The practice of week-long festivals, or revivals, to reach large numbers of people spread over large areas became commonplace and yielded a manner of liturgical *ordo* that became the pattern by which evangelical Christianity has come to be identified—an order that Ross summarizes simply as *song, sermon, decision*. This new pattern created a new emphasis that varied from the emphases of the traditional *ordo* of *bath, word, prayer, table* (taken from the title of a source used in Ross’s research), used by multiple denominations since the second century. I found this chapter’s historical perspective fascinating and enlightening, full of information on liturgical shape in evangelicalism that I previously knew only subconsciously. In reading this background, I could recognize the pattern, as it still colors 21st-century practice.

A secondary theme emerges through the historical background in the first chapter: the idea of *ecumenism* and its seeming rejection within evangelical Christianity. Ecumenism, as Ross regards it, seems to represent commonalities among faith expressions and is juxtaposed with *pragmatism*, a term many liturgical scholars apply to the adapting of liturgy to what works well in a particular situation—as in the frontier American revivals that contributed to evangelical liturgical shape. Ross notes that ecumenism is seen by some liturgical scholars as the exclusive territory of liturgical Christianity, because liturgical shape has been shared across multiple denominations and has thus historically served as a unifying point for the church. Ross gently repudiates this idea, describing early American evangelist George Whitefield as thoroughly ecumenical in his words and actions. She posits that Whitefield saw neither denomination nor liturgy as unifying, but rather understood the unity of the church to be a result of its new birth in Christ. Based on principles highlighted by Whitefield and others, the rest of Ross’s book is colored by the subtle assertion that evangelical church life is not entirely devoid of ecumenism.

Following the opening chapter, the book moves into the first of two case studies. These case studies in chapters 2 and 5 are rather light reading compared to the rest of the book, which can be challenging in its density and complexity. They are intended to demonstrate how churches defined as “mainstream evangelical”

can and do defy the dichotomy. Both case studies are from the United States: a nondenominational church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and an Evangelical Free Church in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

The case studies support the author's assertion that the divide between liturgical and evangelical, ecumenical and pragmatic, need not be as profound as some people have imagined. This is particularly apparent in the first case study (chapter 2), Eastbrook Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Ross demonstrates that the liturgical shape is intentional, designed to direct thinking and teaching in specific ways. But she also notes the more pragmatic features of the church's life in the outworking of faith through community involvement, via local mercy ministries and cross-cultural evangelistic efforts. Also notable in the Eastbrook case study is the church's intentional seeking of relationships with other Christian institutions in their situation. The message is that the church does not choose to define its identity over against other traditions, which is a common charge by the liturgical side against evangelicals.

The second case study concerns itself with West Shore Evangelical Free Church in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. One of the prevailing themes drawn out by the author is that this church views unity and development as the body of Christ as being more important than individual application of faith. The study reveals this church's philosophy of being "gently liturgical" with an eye toward a more collective growth than one might expect from a church in this evangelical denomination.

Overall, I found the case studies interesting reading and informative, but also somewhat distracting from the flow and depth that Ross so brilliantly achieves in chapters 1, 3, and 4. The density of the material in those chapters requires so much concentration that I found myself in a zone of intensity. Moving then to the lighter nature of the case studies in chapters 2 and 5 was, for me, slightly jarring.

Chapters 3 and 4 are where this book goes extremely deep—so complex that I reread them a few times to be sure that I fully understood them. Both chapters are efforts to drill down to more specific points of the dichotomy, and they get into some very heavy, and at times convicting, territory.

Chapter 3, "Fundamentalism versus Rite? Rethinking the Scripture/Liturgy Relationship," asks whether scripture or liturgy should be of primary importance. In her writing, Ross facilitates "conversations" between, on the one hand, Roman Catholic and Lutheran liturgical scholars and, on the other, evangelical systematic theologians. The author notes that scholars from both sides agree that *fundamentalism* deifies scripture and is an outlier to the argument at hand. What follows is a balanced working out of the opposing views. I found this chapter rather convicting, inasmuch as my denominational choice demonstrates perhaps a mild slant toward

scriptural deification. The arguments of the liturgists, though at times somewhat extreme, helped me realize that to effectively (even if not intentionally) err toward placing the scriptures ahead of the person of Christ is not only possible but likely quite common in Western evangelicalism.

It's worth noting here that this book is extremely well-researched and has a truly impressive bibliography. In terms of copious citations and diversity of sources, chapter 3 stands out as exceptional. Ross not only draws from many sources but also cites them to great effect in the prose, employing quotations without disturbing the overall flow of the discussions. She achieves an outstanding, balanced discussion, despite having already revealed her own inclinations.

Chapter 4 further explores the complexity and depth of these topics, with Ross facilitating another hypothetical discussion between two scholars. The discussants talk about the accusation by some from the liturgical side that evangelicalism is so concerned with the individual—that is, with personal salvation and with an eventual escape from the flesh—that it is more closely aligned with Gnosticism than with the gospel. Consequently, evangelicalism tends toward John's gospel, while liturgical thought more closely aligns with the three synoptic gospels. This conclusion is supported by considering, among other things, the lack of overt sacramental practices in the writings of John, along with his relative downplaying of apostolic hierarchy in comparison to the synoptic writers, who tend to foreground the place of the twelve primary disciples. Ross suggests that although the two traditions may be modeled after different emphases from these respective gospel traditions, there is unity to be found in the same Christ and in the same canon of scripture to which the four gospels belong, if not in the same practices.

In the book's conclusion, Ross is careful not to diminish "genuine disagreement" (130) in an effort to find middle ground between the stances presented and debated throughout the book. "To celebrate commonality," says Ross, "is not to deny or flatten differences" (130). The spirit of the book is the desire to find middle ground, and this may or may not include resolution of all differences. The conclusion suggests that this middle ground can be most easily effected in local contexts. Ross offers solutions based in pragmatism: molding liturgy based on history as well as the present needs of congregations in guiding them toward spiritual engagement. She correctly notes that "theologies of worship do not transfer wholesale from one context to another" (136).

As a person working in a cross-cultural context, that final quote hits home. How often do I unwittingly make a decision based on what works well in my own cultural milieu, but which is perhaps less effective for the context in which I work? How tempted am I propose a rigid solution to questions I may not yet fully

understand while working in a context foreign to me? I'm afraid that the struggle implied in these questions will not go away soon.