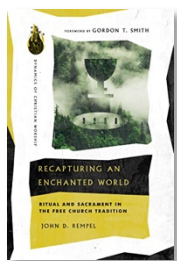


[Review] *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition*, by John D. Rempel



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Rempel, John D. *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2020. 240pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-4929-1.

In *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition*, John D. Rempel wants to help worshipers and pastors in the Free Church tradition¹ to develop a more robust sacramental theology. Rempel's project aims to retain the "evangelical spirit" of Free Church Christianity, by which he envisions an emphasis on participation in Christ. Simultaneously, Rempel wants the Free Church to learn from the riches of historical Christianity, especially the pre-Enlightenment era, where the spiritual and the material were experienced holistically. The theological core of Rempel's recovery of sacramental theology emphasizes Christ's incarnation "as the door to a universe in which matter mediates spirit and allows us to 'touch and handle things unseen'" (xv). Rempel hopes that discovering how God's grace can be mediated via physical objects will help the Free Church "to reclaim the enchanted world of God's nearness in worship and discipleship" (xv).

The first three chapters of the book provide the theoretical, theological, and philosophical groundwork that the rest of the book builds upon. In the first chapter, Rempel provides a foundational definition of ritual as a symbolically dense, repeated action "that evokes belonging, memory, and promise" (5) and which roots individual experience within a communal context. Whereas before the Reformation, Christians inhabited an enchanted world in which they experienced the physical and spiritual worlds holistically, Rempel argues that Protestants, especially in the Free Church, have increasingly belonged to a disenchanted world. Under disenchantment, the physical world (rational, objective, and governed by its own laws) is separated from the spiritual realm (nonrational, subjective, and improvable).

In chapter 2, Rempel argues that retrieving historical Christian rituals, symbols, and signs will help Free Church Christians regain this enchanted world. The church has been given two kinds of signs to comprehend the great mystery of Christ's incarnation: word and sacrament. Because words fail to express the sheer scope of the Christian gospel, the church has recognized a variety of sacraments that mediate Christ's continuing presence in the church through earthly means. In the third chapter, Rempel explores how ritual—most fully

¹ The Free Church tradition encompasses a range of Protestant liturgical traditions that historically have exercised freedom from fixed liturgical forms in their worship. Traditions that might be considered part of the Free Church include Mennonites, Baptists, Congregationalists, evangelicals, and Pentecostals.

expressed in the Christian sacraments—effectively expresses the Christian faith’s inexpressible qualities: “Sacramental words and gestures concentrate and stylize the story of salvation. They engage all our senses. Together they unleash our imagination and our memory and bring within reach the human and divine promises that ground us and offer us a place of belonging in the vastness of the cosmos” (53). Because they are linguistically dense, expressively lean, and multivalent in meaning, sacraments condense and intensify the Christian gospel into tangible form.

In the second half of the book (chapters 4–10), Rempel’s focus shifts to a descriptive overview of sacramental history. He uses this historical description to construct and articulate a new sacramental theology for the Free Church that draws upon the insights of historical Christian theology while reflecting the concerns and critiques of Free Church Christians. Chapter 4 addresses the sacramentality of time. Rempel argues that retrieving the liturgical calendar’s contrast of basic linear time (*chronos*) with times of sacramental potency (*kairos*) can help reenchant a world whose rhythms of life and time have been eroded by forces such as mass industrialization. In chapter 5, Rempel provides a historical overview of baptism, progressing from pre-Christian Jewish rituals to the Anabaptist response to Reformation baptismal theologies. From this history, he develops an expanded theology of a sacramental believer’s baptism that emphasizes the centrality of the incarnation. He carefully navigates a path that safeguards “both the integrity of the Spirit’s initiative and that of the believer’s response” (96).

The final five chapters are devoted to the Lord’s Supper. Chapters 6–8 provide a comprehensive historical overview of how the practice and theology of the Lord’s Supper developed throughout the patristic, early medieval, late medieval, and Reformation eras. As with the chapter about baptism, the primary focus here is on Anabaptist theology (especially as articulated by Pilgram Marpeck). For Rempel, Anabaptism is the stream of Reformation theology that provided the historical foundation from which future Baptist, evangelical, or Pentecostal theologies of the Lord’s Supper developed. In this emerging Free Church tradition, there was already a lean understanding of how Christ’s incarnation enables the created order to communicate the things of God. With the rise of the Enlightenment, the Free Church’s emphasis on an individual, inward response to God’s revelation coincided with the Enlightenment’s concern for individual action based on reason, causing this incarnational sacramental theology to unravel further. The final two chapters respond by addressing practical and constructive concerns for recentering the Lord’s Supper in Free Church worship. In chapter 9, Rempel explores the question of open communion and the paradox of hospitality and covenant at the heart of the church’s table ministry. In chapter ten, he addresses other practical questions related to the practice of the Lord’s Supper: the role of foot-washing, frequency of communion, and ritual authority in sacramental practice.

The turn toward history and practical sacramental concerns in the book’s second half is where *Recapturing an Enchanted World* becomes particularly useful for the practitioners Rempel addresses. At the outset, Rempel states that this book is for worshipers and leaders of worship and is “not a theologian’s book for other theologians” (xvi). His chapters on the sacramentality of time and open communion (chapters 4 and 9) stand out in this regard. In these chapters, he clearly and insightfully articulates the key theological issues at stake. Practitioners seeking a comprehensive but accessible guide to how scripture has informed the church’s sacramental and theological practices will find this book a rich resource. Even for a book that calls for a major correction in Free Church sacramentology, Rempel is markedly non-polemical throughout this book. For instance, throughout *Recapturing*, Rempel’s description of choice for the Free Church traditions is “liturgically

lean” (versus the liturgically “stout” traditions he wishes to emulate). Rempel suffuses his prose with analogies, anecdotes, and richly evocative language that clarifies the sometimes-dense nature of the topics he is discussing.

I am, however, unsure how successful this volume will be at achieving Rempel’s aim to persuade practitioners across the entire breadth of the Free Church. His diagnosis of a widespread experience of disenchantment that can be remediated only by a recovery of ritual and symbol (enabling us to inhabit a second naiveté) speaks the theological and philosophical dialect of a particular subset of the Free Church. The emphasis on Anabaptist history and theology in constructing a Free Church sacramentology gives the book a strongly Mennonite orientation. Such an approach marginalizes other critical Christian traditions, such as Pietism, that exerted significant influence on Holiness, evangelical, and Pentecostal traditions (particularly through the influence of Methodism). Accordingly, many Free Church practitioners may struggle to relate to Rempel’s path “from a precritical to a postcritical faith in the transcendent” (28).

Many Free Church practitioners would resonate more with Rempel’s approving description of the church in the Global South. Here Rempel describes their worship as having a naturally sacramental dimension, even as their worship rejects ritualism and embraces charisma and ecstasy. He rejects the possibility that this kind of worship could be truly incarnate in the disenchanting Global North. Instead, only a recovery of ritual and symbol could serve this context. However, many of the theologies and practices of Contemporary Praise and Worship (the form of worship practiced by a majority of Free Church Christians) share similarities in spirituality and worship with the churches of the Global South. Many of these practitioners have not yet lost their first naiveté and are not searching for a postcritical faith. For these groups within the Free Church, Rempel’s diagnosis is less likely to find widespread agreement.

A more sustained reflection of the breadth of the Free Church tradition would have helped shape Rempel’s important argument into a form that could effectively address a broader cross-section of the Free Church. Even so, this book makes a compelling theological argument that deserves wide engagement. It sits helpfully alongside a host of other books that are being produced by Pentecostal and evangelical theologians—for instance, Emilio Alvarez’s *Pentecostal Orthodoxy: Toward an Ecumenism of the Spirit*, Glenn Packiams’s *Blessed, Broken, Given*, and Gordon Smith’s *Evangelical, Sacramental, and Pentecostal: Why the Church Should Be All Three*—which hope to encourage sacramental renewal within the Free Church. Furthermore, it offers one of the most accessible historical overviews of sacramental history and could serve as a textbook for worship and church history courses.