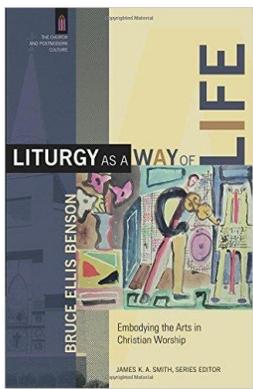


[Review] *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*, by Bruce Ellis Benson

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Bruce Ellis Benson. *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013. 160pp. ISBN: 978-0-8010-3135-9.

Book review

Bruce Ellis Benson's *Liturgy as a Way of Life* is a recent addition to Baker Academic's Church and Postmodern Culture series. Series Editor James K. A. Smith writes that "Drawing on the wisdom of established scholars in the field, the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice." From his expertise in philosophy and his experience as a jazz musician, Benson brings a theological and hermeneutical focus on the arts in congregational worship and daily life.

The two foundational premises for all artistic creation, according to Benson, are that they "exhibit the most basic structure of creaturely existence—the dynamic of *call and response*," (19) and that artistic creation is a process of *improvisation*, not a creation out of nothing. The pattern of call and response, which runs throughout Scripture, affirms the fundamental relationship between God and humanity: God speaks, initiates, commands; and humans respond appropriately. As people created in God's image, we are called to join him in shaping and molding what he has created; if God is a creator, then we as his image-bearers are called to be creators. Of course, our creative capacity is finite, limited to working with the materials which God himself has provided. We do not create *ex nihilo*, as God does, but we have the God-given ability to work creatively with what is at hand—or, as Benson puts it, to *improvise*. Improvisation, in this sense, is "grounded in the very nature of God's creation" (26), for although God creates out of nothing, he is also an "improviser" who creates using the materials of his creation (as in Genesis 2:7, 19).



Among the clearest biblical examples of God’s call to us is Paul’s exhortation to “present our bodies as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). Benson argues that “sacrifice” in this context could be rendered “sacrificial *work of art*,” since we are among “the greatest works of art that God—the ultimate artist—has created” (20). The fact that the process of transformation (verse 2) that God has in mind for us is something that we are very much involved with is evidence that God “calls us to help shape and mold what he has created” (21). The call to be *living works of art* is a call to live *liturgically*, not merely in the way we worship at church, but in our whole way of life (which is the original meaning of “liturgy”) (24). Thus, the title *Liturgy as a Way of Life*.

To summarize Benson’s thesis:

[T]he fundamental structure of our lives is that of the call and response. We are called and we respond. That call and response can rightly be considered artistic in that we are—in our being—God’s works of art. That we participate with God in developing ourselves (not to mention being creators of specific artworks) is due to our call to be living works of art. And the way in which we live our lives, following Jesus’s example, is as liturgical beings who worship God in all that we do. (24–25)

Having laid out his basic hypothesis in the opening pages of the book, Benson proceeds to articulate the implications of his position in chapters 2 through 5. Chapter 2, “Deconstructing the Discourse of Art,” is Benson’s critique of the contemporary art world. In particular, he challenges modernist assumptions about art and the status and role of the artist: the myth of the “lone inspired genius,” the cult of artistic originality, the notions of artistic autonomy and freedom, and the elevation of art to the place of “religion.”

Chapter 3, “Improvising Like Jazz,” offers an alternative vision for artistic activity, based on the understanding that all human creativity is fundamentally improvisational, in the sense that it is connected to and builds on existing ideas, and is always situated within some kind of “tradition.” Understood this way, improvisation is a communal phenomenon, in which artists to one degree or another draw from history and from one another. The author points to different church congregations that incorporate the arts into their liturgy and celebrate the place of artists in the worshiping community. The challenge for Christians, whether or not they are “artists” by occupation, is to live all of life improvisationally, drawing on what has been given, in the context of a worshiping community.

Chapter 4, “On Not Being an Artistic Whore,” outlines the kinds of pitfalls and tensions that Christian artists must be prepared to face in the art world. There will always be the danger of trying to cater to the expectations of a particular audience, whether it be the Christian community, the cultural elite, the art critics

or the masses. The challenge for the artist will always be to create with integrity, recognizing that “my prime responsibility as an artist is toward God” (118). To “speak truth” artistically is to acknowledge the brokenness of the world along with the hope of its redemption. “This is why we can call the artistic vocation *prophetic*: prophets speak the truth to their communities. But how do they speak that truth? The answer: our lives and our art become *icons* that point to God” (126).

Chapter 5 explores the implications of “becoming living works of art,” the concept Benson proposed at the beginning of the book. Living liturgically will involve the interplay of what he calls “intensive liturgy”—“what happens when Christians assemble to worship God”—and “extensive liturgy”—“what happens when Christians leave the assembly to conduct their daily affairs” (127–8). In extensive liturgy we are “called to be creative improvisers in all that we do. . . . Our call, then, is to take this gift of improvisation seriously as we shape our lives—not simply by ourselves but in community—into lives that glorify God” (128–9). Intensive liturgy gives abundant scope for embodying a variety of art forms in a community of improvisers. The important concern will always be that expressions of the arts be *iconic*—that is, that they point to God, not merely to themselves. In intensive liturgy “we acknowledge the presence of God through our various liturgies and respond to his call to live liturgically in the world of everyday life. As Romano Guardini writes in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: ‘The practice of the liturgy means that by the help of grace, under the guidance of the Church, we grow into living works of art before God, with no other aim or purpose than that of living and existing in his sight’” (156).

This book deserves the careful attention of Christians concerned about authentic worship. Artists, musicians, pastors, and worship leaders will benefit from the rich theological, ecclesiological, and aesthetic insights of this excellent volume. It is scholarly without being pedantic, eminently approachable for readers with limited background in philosophy. Benson offers a penetrating and enlightening critique of contemporary trends in art, and also of worship in many Protestant churches, presenting a compelling case for becoming “living works of art,” because this kind of living is at the heart of being truly human. I heartily recommend *Liturgy as a Way of Life*.

Survey of related sources

Benson’s book breaks new ground in the discourse among Christian scholars who over the past few decades have sought to articulate a distinctive biblical aesthetic. The literature on this subject is voluminous, but here are a few of what I consider to be the best examples.

Among the leaders in this undertaking is Nicholas Wolterstorff, whose seminal volume *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Eerdmans, 1980), signals a Christian challenge to modernist aesthetics which divorce art from everyday life and regard artists as an enlightened elite responsible to no one but themselves. Wolterstorff argues that “the Christian sees the artist as a responsible agent before God,” serving both God and his creation “in the very production of his art” (78). Elitism, for the Christian, is replaced by assuming the role of obedient humble servants. Art exists not merely “for art’s sake,” but for the sake of human life, and art in God’s world, in addition to being an object for contemplation, may serve a variety of valuable functions—liturgical, social, and cultural—under the lordship of Christ.

Frank Gaebelein, in *The Christian, the Arts and Truth: Reclaiming the Vision of Greatness* (Multnomah Press, 1985) maintains that because “all truth is God’s truth,” Christians must reject a false dichotomy between sacred and secular and view all of life, including the arts, as being under the lordship of Christ. Christians are called to serve with excellence in all spheres of life, so that Christ’s lordship may permeate every realm of human experience.

Jeremy Begbie’s impressive work *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (Baker, 2001) is another carefully reasoned essay which attempts an integration of theology and the philosophy of art. Begbie’s account of the arts rests on an awareness of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, the mediator of creation, and the ultimate transformation and renewal of the created order through the work of Christ. According to Begbie, human creativity on the part of Christians participates in Christ’s work of remaking and reclaiming his creation.

Like Begbie, Andy Crouch’s *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (InterVarsity, 2008) calls Christians to be involved in the process of (re)making culture in light of the Genesis cultural mandate, as well as of the redeeming work of Christ. The book gives a clear description of Christian vocation and calling in relation to our place as creative agents in God’s world.

Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts, by Harold Best (InterVarsity, 2003), is an eloquent theological and practical exposition of the role of aesthetic life in Christian worship. Because humans are worshipers from the moment of creation, all of life for the Christian—including the arts—is bound up in worship. The book explores in great detail the implications of this reality for the worship of the church, and calls artists to offer their work in the light of Romans 12:1.

Michael Card's *Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity* (InterVarsity, 2004) is a passionate appeal to all Christians to live creative lives. Whether or not they are artists, all Christians have a capacity for creativity by virtue of their being made in God's image. We are called to live creative lives, says Card; but for the Christian, the call to artistry is a call to "radical obedience." "For we will never be able to pick up the basin and towel, or the paintbrush or the ballet slipper until we have first submitted in humility to the Servant Lord" (86).

By far the most comprehensive treatment of biblical aesthetics is Hans Urs von Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Ignatius Press, 1989), a monumental study in seven volumes! Balthasar points to the glory of the Incarnation as the ultimate source and demonstration of the "beautiful," for it represents the infinite perfection of divine form. Eloquently written, a masterpiece of theological argument, this work is one of the great achievements of Christian scholarship from the 20th century—but definitely not for the casual reader or the faint of heart.

Finally, I recommend the periodical *Christianity and the Arts* (ISSN 1080-7618), which has served as a repository for much of the finest Christian scholarship on the subject of aesthetics since its inception in 1994.

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