

Review of Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*

Robert D. Falconer¹

Wolterstorff N 2015. *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*. Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology (KLRT). Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

1. Introduction to the Author

Nicholas Wolterstorff is an American Philosopher with wide-ranging philosophical and theological interests in aesthetics, epistemology, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, metaphysics, and philosophy of education, and is the Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology at Yale University. Previously he was professor at Calvin College, the Free University of Amsterdam, and the University of Notre Dame. Wolterstorff, together with Alvin Plantinga and William Alston developed and expanded upon a view of religious epistemology that later became known as reformed epistemology. Among the countless articles he has written, his recent book publications include the following: *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008), *Justice in Love* (2011), *The Mighty*

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology (2012), and *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (2015).

2. Background to the Book

Wolterstorff's book, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*, forms a part of the *Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology (KLRT)* which are meant to be something like the evangelical equivalent of the Gifford Lectures in natural theology. This series features prominent theologians who are committed to the project of faith seeking understanding, and who make this understanding practical.

Other projects on liturgy I have read and feel are important to the discussion are (1) Joseph Ratzinger's (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (2000). He purposed to assist a renewal of understanding of the liturgy and offer an aid to the understanding of faith within the Roman Catholic tradition and give faith its central form of expression in the (Catholic) Liturgy. (2) From a very different perspective are the works written by the Reformed Philosopher, James K. A. Smith. (i) *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies; 2009). Here Smith explores cultural liturgies in shopping malls, stadiums, and universities which, as he says, are actually liturgical structures that influence and shape our thoughts and affections. In this book he focuses on the themes of liturgy and desire, desiring the Kingdom, God's Kingdom, and makes the powerful statement, 'We are liturgical creatures'. (ii) In his next book, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Cultural Liturgies; 2013), Smith demonstrates how worship works in shaping us through liturgical practices. Lastly, and most recently, (iii) *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (2016), Smith offers an accessible version of *Desiring the Kingdom* employing contemporary culture to highlight his

arguments and discussions. He also proposes (liturgical) practices for shaping the Christian life for individuals and communities.

The God We Worship is somewhat different from Ratzinger's *The Spirit of the Liturgy* and the works written by James K. A. Smith on liturgy, focussing on the implicit theology of God that we find in liturgy. Though I do find it somewhat strange that Wolterstorff does not engage with either, both being prominent voices of our time! Granted, it is quite a different project. Further, I also find it rather fascinating that of the three scholars I mentioned, two of them are academic philosophers, rather than theologians. Be that as it may, Wolterstorff explores in his book the implications of the traditional elements of liturgy and that our assumptions in worship and liturgy are significant in observing the depths of understanding of God in historical Christianity. Navigating across the Orthodox, Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Reformed liturgies, he points out the theological features of God that have been neglected. It is these neglected features of God implicit in liturgy that interest Wolterstorff, and with which this book, *The God We Worship* is concerned.

3. Summary of the Book

Wolterstorff starts off his book by articulating his literary project in liturgical theology. As he says, this is not a development in systematic theology whereby at the end he might say something like, 'This is the God we Christians worship'. The book is, however, primarily about 'making explicit the understanding of God implicit in Christian worship' and then making that understanding clear by explaining it, developing it, elaborating on it and defending it. An important point is made by Wolterstorff, that liturgical theology considers firstly the self-understanding by the church of the theology that is both implicit and

explicit in its liturgy, rather than the church's self-examination of its liturgy. In this way he argues that liturgical theology is more akin to creedal theology. This of course offers a unique way of considering liturgical practice and theology in a way that is perhaps very rare among liturgical theologians.

One can appreciate that Wolterstorff likens liturgy to music in that one acquires the 'liturgical know-how', obviously by observing others and participating with them. And like music, he believes, liturgy can be enacted either correctly or incorrectly. Though he fails to mention that even music has different genres, but giving him his due, he does reference a wonderful variety of liturgical traditions throughout his book. While acknowledging liturgical worship as a communal activity I appreciated the good mention of liturgy in personal devotion.

Even in so called non-denominational congregations it is pointed out that they too have some sort of liturgy, even if there is not a liturgical text. There is a certain know-how of worship in such contemporary churches. Here, Wolterstorff touched on a significant aspect in contemporary churches today, and while it was only touched upon briefly it would have been helpful if he had developed this issue further in light of his overall project, perhaps even in a subsection of a chapter. He does not. Though later he makes mention of traditional liturgies and their depth, richness and beauty which in his opinion, and I think he is right, the alternative contemporary liturgies lack. He highlights the problem asking relevant questions, but offers no suggestion of a way forward for such 'reductive flattening-out' alternative liturgies.

Central to the book is the idea that while the church enacts its liturgy in such a way as to actualise and manifest herself; God also acts. God acts in liturgy. When Wolterstorff talks about making explicit in liturgy what is implicit, he is asking questions like: (1) What would God have to be

like for it to make sense for us to bless God? (2) What would God have to be like for it to make sense for us to address God, whatever the content of our address? (3) What would God have to be like for it to make sense to worship God in the way Christians do? Such questions, he says, point us to the theological logos of the liturgy.

The book then moves on to a discussion on *God as worthy of worship*. Of course, when Christians gather to worship, they gather in the hope that we ourselves will be changed, that we could be energised or guided in our everyday life, and more than this, central to our worship is our enactment of liturgy to worship God. Therefore, what is implicit in the liturgy is that God is to be worshipped. The orientation of such worship is *Godward* in what we say and sing and in the actions, kneeling, bowing or raising our hands. Such actions naturally should also include the attitude of adoration, awe and reverence.

Liturgy is therefore, as Wolterstorff explains, ‘a particular mode of Godward acknowledgement of God’s unsurpassable greatness’, which is why our appropriate liturgical stance should be awe, reference and grateful adoration. This is also expressed in physical posture, kneeling, silence, and even in church architecture and church art.

While the Christian life should be an acknowledgment of who God is and what he has done, Wolterstorff rejects the idea that the Christian life as a whole is worship. While liturgy might be one important part of worship, I feel he is too restrictive here. And again, one wonders why he has not consulted his colleague, James K. A. Smith, where he talks of people being ‘liturgical creatures’, and then developed the idea of liturgy in everyday life. As important and beautiful as I think liturgy is, I argue that worship is broader than traditional liturgy: we see this in the Psalms, in the life and ministry of Jesus and in many of the New Testament epistles.

In the next chapter, *God as One Who is Vulnerable*, Wolterstorff again comes across too strongly, I think, saying, ‘The application of these points is that if one has the right understanding of love, of obligation, and of the relation of love to obligation, one will have no hesitation in saying that enacting its liturgy is not just a good thing for the church to do but obligatory’. Assuming he is talking about traditional liturgy, I agree it is a good thing for any church to do, but just how obligatory it is I think is up for discussion, and I certainly don’t think Scripture offers detailed doctrine on the issue of church liturgy.

It is argued that should the church be guilty of wrongdoing in not worshipping God through liturgy, the usual way in which the church should enact liturgy, God is being vulnerable in being wronged. I don’t find his argument here particularly convincing, though. He does have a point, however, when he talks about the part in the liturgy when our sins are confessed, this liturgical enactment does presuppose that God is vulnerable in being wronged, because he certainly has been, for that is what sin is. As Wolterstorff put it, ‘Our sin against God takes the form of depriving God of the obedience that is due God’.

I found the chapter on *God as One Who Participates in Mutual Address* enlightening. Wolterstorff explains that Christians address God through liturgy with the purpose that God will listen to what we are saying with an expectation that God would offer a favourable response. The implicit understanding here, according to Wolterstorff is that our liturgical enactment in addressing God is that God is one who listens *and* responds to us, and this means that he is one who participates in mutual address. God is, of course, also free to respond as he wishes. Liturgy is not a manipulation tool. He says it succinctly like this, ‘The enactment is *for* that mutual address and listening. The people enact the liturgy *in order* that mutual address and listening may take place; this contributes to giving our liturgical adoration of God its distinctive character’.

Following on from the previous chapter, the next, *God as One Who Listens*, we are reminded that many theologians and Christian philosophers, Wolterstorff himself included, have spoken about God as speaker or as revealer, but not many have explored the idea of God as one who listens. This is perhaps the most significant contribution that this book makes. At this point the book explores the speech-act theory – locutionary and illocutionary acts, and so on. One might have expected to see reference to Kevin Vanhoozer’s (2005) work, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* here. I believe Vanhoozer would have added considerable theological depth on the speech-act theory to the present work.

He points out that ‘the very same speech act that we address to God is the one that God listens to’. Not surprisingly, Wolterstorff is awed by the fact that God who is ineffably great, has an interest in our ‘puny, transitory, circumscribed, and defective’ speech act! And that by listening to what we say to God, this puny speech act of ours becomes the connection between us and God. In this way, the One who is exalted above all, humbles himself and simultaneously elevates us.

The book develops the discussion with the question, *What Are We Saying When We Say That God Listens?* Rightfully, Wolterstorff acknowledges the problem that we make God into *our* image (anthropomorphising) when we talk of him as listening and speaking. Solving this apparent dilemma, he distinguishes between various terms. A term, Wolterstorff argues, can be used (1) figuratively, (2) metaphorically or (3) by analogical extension. Neither figurative nor metaphor is being employed here, he proclaims, rather when one talks about God as one who listens and speaks, and so an analogical extension is being used. He explains that analogical extension sits between both figurative and metaphorical, it is ‘to say of God that God attends to and grasps what we say to God or does

something a great deal like that'. Wolterstorff provided detailed discussion here with several examples to bring his point across.

God as One Who Hears Favourably, is the topic of the following chapter. Wolterstorff asks the question, 'What are we asking God to do when we ask God to hear favourably our address to God? How are we to understand this liturgical act?' By asking God to hear our address favourably, we are assuming that he can respond to our praise and thanksgiving, that he is able to accept it and can respond to our petition for forgiveness. In the liturgical part where the Lord's Prayer is said, particularly with reference to 'Your kingdom come' which Wolterstorff explores in depth, he highlights that this offers an implicit understanding of God. When we ask God to hear favourably here he becomes actively involved in bringing the full expression of his kingdom. After a serious discussion of N.T. Wright's work on God's kingdom and its coming, Wolterstorff suggests that all our petitions should be understood as having, as their overarching context, our prayer for the coming of God's kingdom. The implicit theology in 'your kingdom come' is now obvious, Wolterstorff explains:

We understand God, unsurpassable in glory, holiness, and love, as engaged in bringing about the full manifestation of God's kingdom. In what we do in our daily lives, and in our enactment of the liturgy, we align ourselves with God's bringing about of God's kingdom; in our prayer, that God hears favourably what we say, we give voice to our longing for the coming of God's kingdom.

God is one who listens, but he is also as the next chapter argues, *God as One Who Speaks*. In many churches, extended listening as Wolterstorff points out, occurs when we listen to a sermon preached. God comes down to our level and listens to us favourably *and* speaks to us in such a way that we can understand. What is implicit in Christian liturgy is that God is one who both listens and speaks. No doubt, Wolterstorff also argues

that the minister speaks on behalf of God, speaking to a particular people here and now. In this chapter he engages with Karl Barth, who is emphatic that the Bible is not God's Word, Christ alone is, Christ alone is God's speech. Wolterstorff offers a counter-argument. Being the Reformed Philosopher that he is, he looks to John Calvin who in turn had held that 'in church proclamation, the minister speaks in God's name, speaks on behalf of God. The minister is an ambassador of God, a deputy, a representative'. The question is, who is right, Karl Barth or John Calvin?

Lastly, the chapter, *The Understanding of God Implicit in the Eucharist*, offers a fascinating development to the whole argument. The Eucharist is an enacted memorial of Jesus, it's a memorial meal. This is neither listening nor speaking. Without developing a Eucharistic theology, Wolterstorff adheres to John Calvin's view of the Eucharist. He argues that the Eucharist is the highest form of liturgical communion between God and his people. By taking the elements we receive Christ into ourselves. Wolterstorff proclaims, 'This is a form of communion that goes far beyond that which takes place in mutual address; indeed, it has no close analogue in human interactions'. What is implicit then in the Eucharist, He explains:

God who is of unsurpassable excellence does not only stoop down to listen to us, to hear us, and to speak to us; God stoops down to dwell and work within us in the person of Jesus Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. In mutual speaking and listening, there remains a certain distance between the interlocutors; in the communion that takes place in the Eucharist, all distance is removed.

4. Evaluation of the Book

Asides from the weaknesses already mentioned, I will list some additional weaknesses: (1) one could not help noticing whole sections, sometimes a list almost a page long of questions. Perhaps one might expect such from a philosopher. (2) The author's introductions and conclusions were far from subtle, and were repetitive. (3) I did not think chapter 6, *What Are We Saying When We Say That God Listens?* fitted well into this volume. The tone and content of the rest of the book was very readable at a semi academic level, chapter 6 however was perhaps too philosophical and academic for most lay readers. (4) Acknowledging that *The God We Worship* is a different sort of work from that of James K. A. Smith, I would have liked to have seen more on how this applies in post-modern Christianity and to see the book engaging with churches who perhaps despise traditional liturgies, for example, mega churches, Charismatic churches and the like.

Overall *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* is well worth a read for those interested in liturgy. I note the following strengths: (1) Wolterstorff offers a significant contribution to liturgical theology, he presents us with a new perspective, God is a speaking God, he is a God who communes with us, but he is *also* a God who hears and listens. No one, to my knowledge, has offered a sustained discussion on this idea of God listening. (2) The book is readable throughout, though chapter 6 may be difficult for some. (3) The author engages well with scripture throughout, grounding his arguments in biblical theology. (4) I appreciated Wolterstorff's generous references to traditional liturgies from a variety of liturgical traditions, including those from the Orthodox, Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Reformed churches. Lastly, (5) *The God We Worship* is a God-centred volume, rather than man-centred—God is the one who listens and acts!

Reference List

- Open Biola 2016. Nicholas Wolterstorff. Online profile. Accessed from <http://open.biola.edu/authors/nicholas-wolterstorff>, 01/05/2016.
- Smith JKA 2009. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (cultural liturgies). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- _____ 2013. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Cultural Liturgies). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- _____ 2016. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.
- Ratzinger J 2000. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Vanhoozer KJ 2005. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Wolterstorff N 2015. *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology (KLRT)). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Yale University 2016. Nicholas Wolterstorff. Online profile. Accessed from <http://religiousstudies.yale.edu/people/nicholas-wolterstorff>, 01/05/2016.