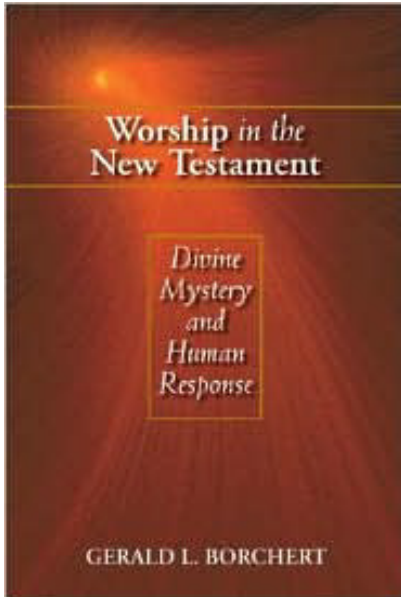


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Borchert, Gerald L.

Worship in the New Testament: Divine Mystery and Human Response

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In this book Gerald Borchert sets out to examine the field of worship in the New Testament. He structures his book as a systematic treatment of worship by going through all the New Testament texts according to their canonical order. Borchert breaks his book into six major parts. The first part deals with reflections on worship in the four Gospels; part 2 deals with the formation of the Christian worshipping communities in Acts, part 3 with the Pauline Epistles, including Hebrews, part 4 with the “Catholic Epistles,” and then part 5 with reflections on the worshipping community in the book Revelation. Part 5 at this point is misleading in respect to its heading, since in the book of Revelation we are not dealing with worshipping *communities*, as the book (which is really a letter, as its opening structure indicates) was addressed to the seven *churches* of Asia Minor (Rev 1:4). Borchert then concludes with concluding reflections on the New Testament canon (which seems to be irrelevant to the main theme that he has undertaken: to examine the subject of worship in the New Testament) and worship in the contemporary world.

Borchert provides at the beginning of his book a helpful list of commentaries and other works on the New Testament books, with one reference to the Didache. One wonders what this list has to do with the theme of worship in the New Testament. Many of these commentaries are general works on each of the canonical books of the New Testament

covering a wide range of issues. It would have been much more profitable if Borchert had cited reference works that are germane to the theme of his book: an examination of worship in the New Testament. Reference texts related to Christian worship itself would have been relevant and helpful at this point.

According to Borchert, this book is a product of his review of “countless notes” that he has written in his years teaching the New Testament (xv). In addition Borchert claims that this work has become for him “a sincere reflection” of his dependence on “the mystery of God that has touched me in Jesus” (xv). Notwithstanding Borchert’s sincerity in his religious convictions, this premise unfortunately has colored the entire book so that, as the reader progresses through the chapters, it becomes quickly evident that this book is not an academic work but rather more of a devotional text for Christian readers.

Borchert begins in his introduction by asserting that he is not simply writing a “theology of worship” based on the New Testament texts but examining each canonical text and interpreting it in the light of worship (2). However, it becomes evident while reading this book that Borchert does in fact do exactly that: he brings in theology in his treatment of worship throughout the book. He addresses this book to “concerned Christians in various churches” who will benefit from his book so that they “will be able to critique [their] present patterns of worship and develop new approaches of responding to divine mystery” (2). We see here that the thrust of the book attempts to be more devotional in its approach than academic, which makes the task of the reviewer difficult in assessing the book from an academic perspective. The readership audience of this book is really a Christian or ecclesial one, not an academic one.

As one proceeds reading through the chapters, beginning with the Gospels, the Pauline letters, and the remainder of the New Testament, the reading becomes at times extremely painstaking and laborious, as Borchert habitually moves off on tangents away from the subject of worship and seems to give readers a mini-commentary on each New Testament book. He goes through every section in each New Testament book or rushes through it, as he does with 2 Corinthians (117–22), where he neglects to address a very important element of worship in his treatment of 2 Corinthians by not dealing with Paul’s struggle with “the thorn in the flesh,” where he prays to “the Lord” (Jesus) three times to remove it (2 Cor 12:8–10). This passage is an extremely important text written by the earliest Christian writer in the New Testament who speaks of his personal devotional prayer life. Borchert merely passes over it with three sentences without further exegeting this significant passage (121).

The sense that the reader has is that Borchert has written a New Testament commentary, not a work on worship itself. Borchert could have better approached the subject by

dealing with the various words and their definitions employed in the New Testament that are translated “worship,” including the various expressions and acts that communicate worship, such as prayer, thanksgiving, hymns, praise, invocation, and so on. Borchert rather deals with irrelevant materials that have no bearing on worship. In a book dedicated to the subject of worship in the New Testament, it was extremely disappointing to see no attempt to define worship according to word usage in the New Testament or to compare at a deeper level early Christian worship with that of the Old Testament and/or Second Temple Judaism.

At the end of each chapter, Borchert provides a worship summary where he summarizes his treatment of each New Testament book. While he makes some helpful remarks, the book still reflects an overtly theological and devotional approach. This is further reinforced by the question(s) that Borchert supplies after his worship summaries. The questions posed also reflect the genre of this book, that it is in essence a devotionally oriented text adapted to a Christian worshipping community, not an academic text. At times the language used in the text appears to reflect the nonacademic flavor of the book, as when the author uses the exclamatory expression “Wow!” (167). This is fine in correspondence or devotional materials but not in the materials of academia.

One of the most disengaging aspects of the book is that Borchert never keeps the reader on topic but diverges considerably with numerous and unrelated material, such as dealing with the *Haustafeln*, or household codes (Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1), in the Pauline corpus (136). Some of Borchert’s references are not properly footnoted, an admission he makes at the beginning of his book, where he refers his readers to the commentaries provided at the beginning (3). The book has, in fact, a list of endnotes. For instance, he alludes to the *pericope adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11) in support of one of his arguments (17), with no comment that this section is spurious. He does the same with Luke 23:34 (40, 65–66) but comments that the longer endings after Mark 16:8 are “clearly later additions” (25). This is an inconsistent use of methodology, and the text-critical matter has no bearing on the subject of a book that is supposed to be focused on Christian worship.

A number of glaring errors also appear in the book. For example, Borchert quotes the imperative to avoid idols in 1 John 5:21 as 1 John 5:20 (209); in his treatment of the canon, he states that the word comes from the Greek word *kanon* but then proceeds to claim that “it is a Semitic term meaning ‘reed’” (233), thereby appearing to confuse a Greek word with the Semitic language or failing to provide the Semitic equivalent to the word *kanon*. In the final chapter, dealing with reflections on contemporary worship, there is again much irrelevant materials brought in, including the question of canonicity. The matter of canonicity is irrelevant to worship. Worship is attested in various forms in any given faith community irrespective of which “canon” they hold to or do not hold to.

This book resembles in many respects the type of material for biblical study that one would find in William Barclay's well-known commentaries on the New Testament, which functioned more as devotional material. Borchert's book should have been titled a concise or brief commentary on the New Testament, as it does not really address the subject it claims to address: Christian worship in the New Testament. It diverges considerably and at times seems to be rushed and disorganized. While this book may have theological and devotional value for confessional ecclesiastical circles, it certainly cannot be commended as an academic text.