

Bruce Ellis Benson. *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. 160 pages. \$18.

In the beginning was the liturgy. This may sound heretical to those who claim the primacy of preached “Word.” If you have ever experienced a highly formalized service that drones on and on, liturgy can seem the opposite of creativity, and the death knell of lively preaching. Bruce Benson, however, seeks to convince us that liturgy (read preaching for liturgy) and life are inseparable. All of creation, as he describes it, is like a jazz movement, composed of patterns and improvisations. Liturgy (preaching, prayer, song) is the jazz of life; it functions like jazz by connecting us to that original movement that calls out for an improvised response. Creation begins with this call and response pattern. God calls forth and creation responds. Rather than focusing on creation as a process *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), Benson suggests that we recognize the importance of the call and response order (44). In other words, God’s call precedes creation’s beauty (36). Creation is not just God’s artwork, but it is an artwork in which creation also participates. Like jazz, God calls forth creation by blending, repeating, and transforming. God creates by improvising. This challenges us to rethink both the purpose and function of art and the shape of the Christian life. Liturgy is art, and art is a way of life.

Benson explains that art is central to who we are as humans (69). This is contrary to the way art is commonly viewed. According to the modern/romantic paradigm of art, thanks to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, artwork is to be “created for no other purpose than to be admired *aesthetically*” (60). Great works of art express emotion, and thus, have nothing to say about truth or beauty (61). Works of art, according to this paradigm, are subjective, and thus, they need a community of experts to declare their value; they can be admired and understood only by a small community of elite (64). In contrast, Benson explains that we need a paradigm for art that better reflects the true nature of human creativity. He proposes an idea of art that reflects the truth of the beauty and the brokenness of the world (124). Beauty enchants us with an enchantment that originates from God (6). For the Christian, then, art does the important work of pointing to God rather than the artist (130). This is crucial for what Benson says about liturgy and the notion of art as a way of life. Liturgical lives are lives that respond and point back to God.

Liturgy, rather than lifeless and boring repetition, is a lived response to the beauty of creation and the active and improvising call from God. Benson explains how this works in the traditional sense of liturgy by making the distinction between intensive and extensive liturgy. Intensive liturgy is that liturgy that teaches, sustains, and feeds us. This is the kind of liturgy normally done within the context of weekly worship (128). Extensive liturgy, on the other hand, is where the true response to God’s call is realized (142). Having been created in the image of God, we are both God’s artwork and God’s artists, responding to God’s call by improvising on ourselves and on the world around us (129). Like jazz, liturgy is a process of improvising that lone individuals cannot do. It must be done within a community: “All of us, as a part of the Christian community, participate in fashioning one another to become beautiful works of art” (15). Like jazz, liturgy is not something that can be done *ex nihilo*, but depends on a tradition and is inherently intertextual (82–83). “Borrowing is what makes it possible” (84). Yet, like jazz, liturgy is also a conversation of entangled speech—sometimes it is harmonious, and sometimes it is not (91–94).

We all know some churches that honor liturgical practices that are aesthetically pleasing, and perhaps specifically cater to those with the cultured authority to evaluate it. For those who see it in such terms, broadening the idea of liturgy to a way of life will be perplexing—if not

altogether threatening. The same may be said for those who view liturgy in terms of dead ritual. For both groups, however, revisiting the meaning of liturgy in the sense that Benson has suggested may be a fresh resource, both for rethinking how and why we do what we do in worship, and for learning to live as communities who respond to God's call by improvising on our own lives, allowing the Word to become flesh.

Michael Anthony Howard, Drew University, Madison, NJ