

Review

Cherry, Constance M. 2021. *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*. 2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 340 pp. ISBN 978-1-5409-6388-8

By Jay Dyrland, DWS

With the rise of the church growth movement in the 1980s and the emphasis on contemporary worship music as an attractive method for getting people into the church building, many books have been written focusing on the style and technique of worship while neglecting other aspects of what it means to corporately worship as the people of God. In *The Worship Architect*, Rev. Dr. Constance Cherry provides a masterclass on worship for anyone interested in exploring the intersection of worship theology and practice. As a practitioner of music, ministry, and academia, Dr. Cherry insightfully and creatively provides a framework for worship leadership incorporating biblical and theological depth while inviting practical and theoretical exploration. This framework is what sets this book apart from most other books in the field. *The Worship Architect* is the result of the life-long learning of a student of music and worship. With two music degrees completed, Dr. Cherry describes reading a book that changed her life, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*.¹ In her own words, “I knew music, but I didn’t know worship. I had not been introduced to the world of worship as its own domain, centuries rich in biblical, historical, theological, and liturgical studies” (p. xi). A newfound curiosity led to further liturgical studies.

Dr. Cherry received a doctor of ministry degree in Christian worship in the first graduating class under the supervision of Dr. Robert E. Webber of Northern Seminary. Not only was she a student in his program, but he also acted as her doctoral thesis supervisor. This led to an invitation for her to serve on the faculty of a school he was forming, the Institute for Worship Studies. The influence of Robert Webber on her teaching and writing cannot be understated. *The Worship Architect* owes much of its ethos to the work and writing of Webber. One only must read, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New*,² to see how

¹ Allen, R., and G. Borrer. *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*. (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).

² Webber, R. E. *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New*. (Nashville, Tn, Abingdon Press, 1998). Dr. Cherry continues many similar topics and themes that are presented in this book – worship renewal, the fourfold pattern of worship, creating flow throughout the service with the use of music, etc.

The Worship Architect reframes and builds upon Webber's vision for worship renewal.

The primary aim of the book is to consider how worship design happens according to God's biblical pattern and to "discover God's expectations for worship" (p. 4). To achieve this goal, Dr. Cherry has "set forth a principle-based, step-by-step, process that is applicable to every tradition, style, and context and that results in biblically faithful, corporately authentic, and culturally relevant services of worship" (p. 3). This book is written for worship leaders, lay-leaders, students, or professors looking to learn or teach others how to "design and lead worship services of vital Christian worship that are true to God whom we worship and also true to the community in which they arise" (p. 4). Not just a textbook of information, it moves from information to transformation as Cherry helpfully organizes each chapter into three sections: explore, expand, and engage. Readers are invited to practice what they read.

The book is built upon four phases with each phase describing correlating aspects related to the central metaphor - worship leader as worship architect. Cherry's approach is to take the worship architect from the general to the specific, moving from purpose to foundations, to the structural plan, and finally stylistic expression. Phase One - "Laying the Foundations of Worship" - establishes biblical worship foundations with worship that is centered in Jesus Christ, the cornerstone. Fundamentally, Cherry believes that understanding of worship flowing from understanding of God. Because of this, biblical worship is recognizing how God has related to God's people in both the Old and New Testaments, and applying patterns and principles in ways that are appropriate to current contexts. The principle of worship as being centered in God's Acts of Salvation (Exodus event and the Christ event), the Godhead, and the pattern of revelation and response are essential ingredients in the foundation. Cherry's definition of worship guides much of her work based on these and other foundations: "Worship is the expression of a relationship in which God the Father reveals himself and his love in Christ, and by his Holy Spirit administers grace, to which we respond in faith, gratitude, and obedience" (p. 28). The cornerstone of all worship, the measure by which worship is to be evaluated, is Jesus Christ. It is Jesus that makes Christian worship, Christian. It is his story, the story of his life, death, resurrections, ascension and coming again that establishes the substance of worship. In worship, through Word and action, we are participants in telling the story of God in Christ at work in our world.

Once the foundation has been laid, the worship architect begins to develop the structure of worship. Phase Two - "Raising the Structure of Worship" - explores the Gospel Order of worship through the historical fourfold *ordo* of Gathering, Word, Table, and Sending. In its most basic form, the structure of worship is a meeting between God and God's people taking place through a kind of

dialogue. God speaks and listens to God's people while they speak and listen to God. The order of worship serves as a kind of guided conversation. Cherry uses the Emmaus Road story of Luke 24 to illustrate how this dialogical structure takes shape. Christ approaches and initiates a conversation with his disciples. Christ engages them with the Scriptures. Christ makes his identity known in the context of the table. Christ inspires them and they run back to Jerusalem to tell the story of what had happened.

This structure is also found in the historic pattern of the fourfold *ordo* - Gathering, Word, Table, and Sending. It finds biblical roots in Acts 2:42, where the believers devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and table fellowship. Early Christian documents, such as Justin Martyr's Apology, generally describe Lord's Day worship consisting of gathering, Word, Table, and sending. This fourfold movement represents a journey into God's presence as the worshipers gather, hear from God in his Word, celebrate the Christ story at the Table, and are sent back into the world transformed by the journey. Cherry views participating in this gospel story week to week as a way of competing with the "host of master narratives [false narratives] that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: who gets to narrate the world" (p. 63)?

Phase One and Two make up the first half of the book by highlighting a thorough biblical and theological approach to worship design. They also provide the most useful aspects of the worship architect framework. The next two phases struggle to be as coherent when considering how the structure of worship is filled with the activities of worship. This could be due to the goal of making the worship architect framework accessible to different styles and traditions. Phase Three - "Installing Windows for Encountering God" - enlightens how prayer, music, and the Christian year, provide openings for participating in the structure of worship. Our prayers, songs, and the Christian year serve to help facilitate the dialogue of worship. Cherry outlines the many different types of prayers that can be considered for worship and focuses on the different styles of music that have been employed in the service of congregational singing. The book gets bogged down in the details of the different prayers and songs. While the content is all good, it is questionable whether modern worship leaders will be concerned about writing a prayer of confession or illumination. The fact that Taizé music and Global song make up parts of the family of congregation singing doesn't necessarily invite the worship leader to incorporate these into their worship orders. Yet, readers who are curious about the breadth and depth of prayer and song in worship and are in contexts where there is freedom to explore will glean practical and beneficial ideas from Phase Three.

Phase Four - Welcoming Worshipers for Authentic Engagement - encourages the worship architect to consider how stylistic choices, hospitality, and global worship (welcoming others) are essential factors for leading in faithful

corporate worship. This phase is perhaps where most worship related issues surface. Dr. Cherry highlights the concern that in the modern church, “we have focused on the packaging of worship while more substantive issues go unattended. Is style more important than the content of worship? The form of worship?” (p. 246). Cherry’s concern is valid. She goes on to say, “Worship style and musical style have become inseparably linked. In many minds they are one and the same” (p. 248). This has resulted in a new two-fold structure – worship and preaching. This new two-fold structure is challenging the principles and patterns of biblical worship as style becomes a foundational factor in worship. The style that Cherry advocates for is called Convergence worship. Her mentor, Robert Webber, promoted this ancient-future model as a way of combining both the historical and contemporary in a way that keeps the content, structure and style of worship in their appropriate places. This model comprises the historical fourfold order as the structure for the dialogue of worship to occur, centered in the ongoing narrative of God’s saving action seen in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Once the content and structure of worship is built, it can be expressed with stylistic nuance depending on a particular time and place and people.

In this second edition of the book, Cherry has included a valuable section on worship during a pandemic. Using the biblical foundations that she presents in Phase One, she explores ways for God’s people to worship when unable to gather with others. Cherry highlights both the blessings and challenges of worship during a pandemic. The blessings opened our eyes to the realities that there are always those who are in some way forced to worship in isolation from others. How do we better help others participate in worship with others? The challenges confronted our norms and expectations. Worship has changed. For example, it is now an option to not gather with others in community as worship is offered through a screen in many, if not most, churches.

I am indebted to Dr. Constance Cherry as I follow in her footsteps, being a student of hers during my own doctoral work at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies. In my current work of teaching and advising students in undergraduate worship studies in a Pentecostal/Charismatic context, I am challenged to see the worship architect framework find its legs. I am less convinced that her goal of providing a principle-based, step-by-step, process that is applicable to every tradition, style, and context is practical. The two-fold order of worship and preaching is entrenched in the weekly experience of many of my students. But the challenge is also the gift. Dr. Cherry continues to inspire me to help my students build upon biblical principles and patterns, so that they may see the substance of their worship as participation in the story of Jesus Christ, patterned in the dialogue of revelation and response, where the gospel story is enacted, and lives are transformed. In the worship and preaching two-fold order of worship, there is still room to engage in

biblical patterns, even if not explicitly following a fourfold order. Cherry herself says, “Much of the story is sung in worship. The content is the story of God.... The journey is accompanied with singing” (p. 215).

The Worship Architect is a beautiful and unique gift to worshipers, worship leaders, students and teachers who endeavor to worship faithfully and lead others faithfully. With gratitude to Dr. Cherry for this resource, it is my hope that we who are worship architects will increasingly become like “the wise man who built his house on a rock, but did not fall, because it has been founded on rock” (Matt. 7:24-25).

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