Review of Sandra Maria Van Opstal. The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World

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The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World
by Sandra Maria Van Opstal, InterVarsity Press, 2016.

Few books have I picked up and read from cover to cover in one sitting. The Next Worship qualifies as one of them. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, a pastor at the Grace and Peace Community in Chicago, Illinois, masterfully addresses throughout this book her questions at the close of her introduction, “How do we lead worship in communities that are growing increasingly diverse? How do I get my congregation onboard with multiethnic worship? Is it even necessary?” (17).

Van Opstal writes about worship within the context of gathering around a table for a meal. In fact, she begins each of the eight chapters with a story; and most of those stories center on cooking or food—a tribute to her mother and pride in her Latina heritage (159). Theologically, she couches her emphases within two scriptural motifs. The first is the parable of the great supper, found in Luke 14, noting that “All are invited [to] the banquet: the social elite as well as those from the highways and byways. The tension mounts: people from different ethnic and socioeconomic standings gather. The result: awkward dinner conversations” (25). Also referring to Luke 14, Van Opstal notes that “First, God calls all people to himself. Second, God calls his people to one another” (60). The second is based on the worship scenes throughout the book of Revelation. She states that “Worship is not only contextual but also crosscultural” (34)—connecting that reality to what transpires in Revelation 7:9–12 (20, 34) and 4:8–11 (20, 74).

The anecdotes she shares, resulting from interactions with her students in a variety of settings as well as her travels, reveal that she is no mere theoretician. Rather, she possesses a broad grasp of many worship cultures that has led her to understand that we best reflect the divine ideal when we take the time to learn from one another. Van Opstal tells the story of being impacted by music learned during a trip to Swaziland and teaching the lyrics to her students, thus broadening their worldview. She surmises that “multicultural worship is not entertainment. It is an act of solidarity with communities we may never meet” (22).

Leadership proves pivotal in creating a climate for effective worship. Van Opstal tackles the subject of shared leadership by relating a story that speaks to those who enjoy privilege as being the ones who often lead out in determining the shape and contours of the worship event. She aptly states that “[l]eadership in relevant, dynamic ways for the future of a diverse church depends on our ability to share leadership” (80). She argues for such collaborative leadership on several levels. For example, she speaks of “inviting crossculturally”; that is, being intentional in seeking individuals from different backgrounds and mentoring them, recognizing that “gender, ethnic or socioeconomic biases affect how we choose leaders” (85). She also stresses the reality that “the rock star will have to move aside for leaders who are willing to share space” (87). By “rock star,” she refers to the leader who demands to be the center of attention, centralizing authority/control to himself or herself.

In addition to other chapters, Van Opstal includes nine valuable appendices that speak cross-culturally.

What I valued most about this book is its cross-generational and international appeal. While it becomes a simplified approach to treat such worship concerns as a black versus white North American phenomenon, worship wars take place in many cultures on every continent. How do we embrace all worshipers by creating an inclusive worship experience that glorifies God and lifts the assembly heavenward?

Van Opstal’s book makes a valuable contribution and should reside in the library of every pastor and worship leader, and it should serve as a reference work for those who instruct worship and liturgy courses.

—Reviewed by Willie E. Hucks II, DMin, associate professor of church ministry, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.