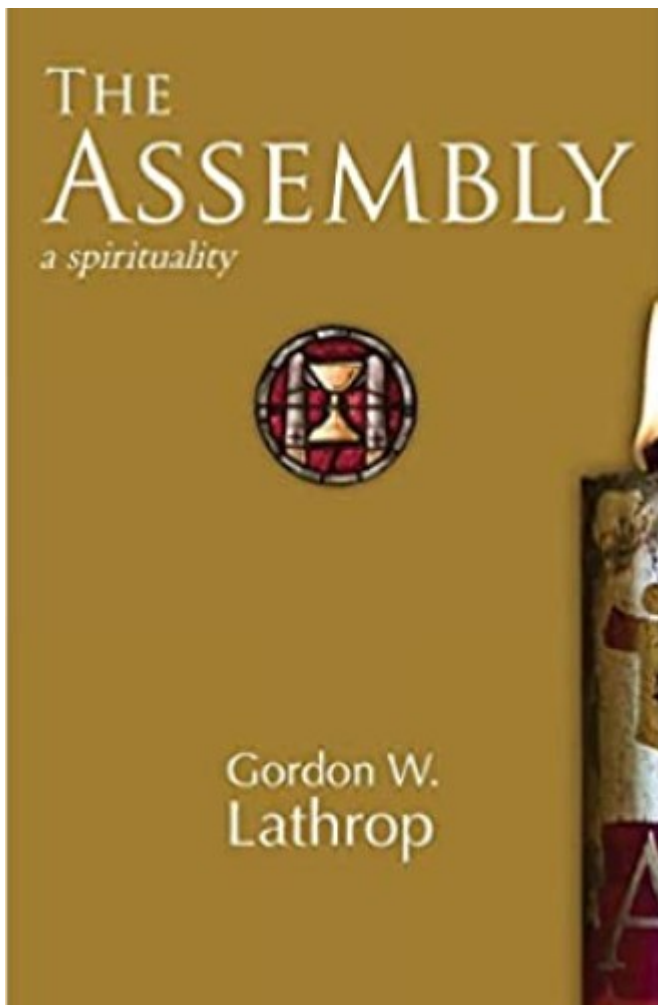


Becoming a people together

Gordon Lathrop roots his case for in-person worship in scripture and Lutheran tradition.

by [Aaron Klink](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue

In Review



The Assembly

A Spirituality

By Gordon W. Lathrop

Fortress Press

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Sixteen years after writing *The Pastor: A Spirituality*, Gordon Lathrop offers a companion volume focused on Christian corporate worship. This passionate, honest, and theologically wise argument for the importance of Christian assembly is rooted in both scripture and social critique of our hyper-individualistic age. *The Assembly* has an urgent tone, perhaps in part because Lathrop wrote it while the COVID-19 pandemic was making it impossible for many Christian congregations to gather safely.

Lathrop is known as a liturgical theologian, but like most of his other books on worship, this volume is clearly rooted in his New Testament graduate study, his experience as a parish and campus pastor, and his career as an educator in Lutheran, Episcopal, and ecumenical settings. Drawing on his own Lutheran tradition, he claims that worship can overcome the dichotomies that inhabit liturgical theology and ethnographic accounts of liturgical practice: “When assemblies are faithful, they are strongly centered yet open, profoundly communal yet always personal, filled with participatory action yet trusting the actor is God.”

Since the beginning of the Christian movement, Lathrop argues, Christians have maintained the importance of corporate assembly for proclaiming and hearing the gospel. He locates evidence for this claim in both scripture and early church documents. Lathrop has argued elsewhere that the Gospels show clear signs that they were written for oral proclamation, a necessity given the low levels of literacy in some early Christian communities.

A theme running through the book is that neither scripture nor the early Christian tradition thinks as individualistically as modern society. Quoting 1 Peter, Lathrop observes that “we ‘no people’ are being made ‘a people together’ in order thus to find our identity graciously given to us and in order to bear witness in this world to the mercy of God.” Assembly makes us aware of the body of Christ’s diversity, which he acknowledges is more present in some assemblies than in others. Those who worship in diverse assemblies know how wonderfully uncomfortable it can be, and how equally a testament to the power of the gospel, to draw in people from all walks of life. In this highly politicized era, Lathrop maintains that political agreement is not what Christians should gather around. Rather, the central symbols of the Christian

faith should orient who we are.

While Lathrop honors diversity, he also argues for some particular norms. He believes that because Christian assemblies should put people in contact with what is “materially real,” congregations should use bread rather than wafers for communion, books rather than recyclable sheets of paper, and candles with fire rather than electric candles. While I see his point, I wonder if it is sometimes worth simplifying our worship practices to make the assembly more accessible to visitors. My congregation created booklets with the musical setting that we are currently using, since our hymnal contains numerous settings in a section that isn’t easy for the uninitiated to navigate.

Lathrop also includes a critique of electronically mediated worship, which may have served a purpose as the pandemic unfolded but seems less necessary now. Here he argues not polemically but theologically. Because the Christian God became flesh and lived among people, he notes, we should worship among people. Simply being in front of a screen means watching the leaders of an assembly without being in the company of others in an embodied way.

In the latter part of the book, Lathrop offers a “critical catechism for the assembly.” Here he examines how the reception of the sacraments and the recitation of the creeds and the Lord’s Prayer form Christians and shape our understanding of the assembly.

Lathrop’s theology is shaped by Lutheran tradition, but his vision is ecumenical. Each of the book’s chapters begins with a story and picture of a particular assembly. These short vignettes are important, since they help readers remember that assemblies are local, particular, and unique in character. Still, readers from non-creedal and non-sacramental traditions may find it a stretch to see the shape of their assembly mirrored in this book.

All readers, however, can learn from Lathrop’s biblical exegesis, cultural analysis, and fervent hope that gathering together will help open our ears to the promises of the gospel and open our eyes and hearts to the staggering number of different people drawn into Jesus’ message. Lathrop reminds us of a basic theological principle that has taken on new meaning in the COVID-19 era: being together matters.