

*Praying Twice*, by Brian Wren

reviewed by [E. Byron Anderson](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

In one of his earliest hymns, Brian Wren wrote that "we will not question or refuse the way you work, the means you choose, the pattern you weave." Yet in the 40 years since he wrote this verse, he has used his poetry, teaching and writing to question the way in which the church questions, names and explores God's ways in the world through corporate worship and Christian song. Now, after an extended period as an itinerant poet, teacher and theologian, Wren has become John and Miriam Conant Professor of Worship at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. His move to his new position is accompanied by the publication of this book, which provides his most sustained argument about the importance and function of congregational song.

When the questions most occupying worship leaders in the traditional versus contemporary music debate focus on what to sing and in what style, we often miss the larger question of why we should sing at all. Wren addresses all these questions as he develops his argument that congregational song is indispensable for the church today. It encourages and inspires Christian life, and it shapes and forms spirituality and theology. What we sing also matters. Congregational song either enlarges and develops Christian faith or distorts and diminishes that faith.

At its best, congregational song serves devotion to God, expresses the way of God's justice, and demonstrates a frugality of speech and action, Wren argues. At its worst, it succumbs to the temptations of pragmatism and entertainment, narcissistically focusing on us rather than drawing our attention to God, and distracting us from giving God our whole heart. At its best, congregational song serves the purposes of God in the church's worship, fellowship and mission as it invites people into the Christian drama and tells the story of Jesus Christ. At its worst it hides the Christian story.

Wren argues that "evangelical necessity" summons liberal churches to give contemporary worship music a critical welcome. It should invite a form of church music that is congregational rather than "soloistic," energetic rather than compulsive, meaningful and emotional, topical and able to connect us to the whole

of the Christian story. Such a welcome encourages worshipping communities to receive the gifts of their particular cultures, but encourages reception only after appraising these gifts in the light of the gospel.

Though the title suggests that this book is about the music and words of congregational song, the emphasis clearly falls on the words. Wren does explore some of the ways in which hymn tunes and other musical compositions offer more than a means for vocalizing lyrics. He invites us to be honest about music's power to delight the ear and evoke emotion. But his extended discussion of the relationships between music and the mind, while interesting in its own right, seems an unnecessary detour. A summary of this material would have been enough to set up Wren's discussion of the power of music to have its way with us. And there are other detours--a proposed revised liturgical order based on the narrative sequence in scripture and a discussion of how theology can be done through drama and the visual arts--that seem to be part of a different argument or book.

Nevertheless, Wren provides an important reference work for pastors, church musicians and all preparing for congregational worship leadership. He offers guidelines for what the words of congregational song can and should be, detailed and inclusive analyses of refrains, choruses and other forms of ritual song and strategies for teaching songs to congregations. Wren's concluding assessment of the various forms of congregational song as a kind of public, communal theological work leads us to the possibility that such song will surprise, challenge and amaze both those who are already Christian and those who are seeking Christ.