

INTO GOD'S PRESENCE: UNDERSTANDING WORSHIP

Rev 4:1-5:14 (7 April 2002)

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^{Rev 4:1}After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ²At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! ³And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. ⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; ⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

"Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come."

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."

^{5:1}Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; ²and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" ³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁴And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

⁶Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He

went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
¹⁰you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped (NRSV).

Worship. *What is it? How do we do it? Why do we do it?* Throughout our land, there is no small controversy about worship among our churches. And the Churches of Christ are no exception. We, too, are in the midst of much discussion and debate concerning worship. A lot of people are describing this situation within many of our congregations as “worship wars.” This is an unfortunate label, and—in my opinion—a label that does not set the tone for an open and healthy dialogue. *We are not at war, and we must not approach worship as combatants.* Yes, many Christians disagree with one another on a variety of issues about what should be done in worship. Should we encourage or should we forbid clapping, raising hands, testimonials, lament services, choruses, PowerPoint presentations on overhead screens, and on and on and on? And what type of hymns is best for worship? Are contemporary songs irreverent or shallow? Are older hymns out of date or out of touch? The list of questions is long, and the feelings about the list are strong.

Disagreement over worship is not new. Some seventy years ago, we—the Churches of Christ—were involved in intense discussions concerning the “new music” that was sweeping our congregations. Those rambunctious Stamps-Baxter songs with alto and bass leads were just too much for many to handle. And then, what about the innovation of putting notes in the songbooks? Alexander Campbell argued that hymns must not be accompanied by musical notations; after all, the notes would distract a person from the words. And the list went on and on and on.

Never in the history of Christianity has there been a period in which significant disagreements did not occur. Our current situation is in no way unique. The *fact* that we have disagreements does not make us any less the people of God. But *how we treat* those

with whom we disagree may very well determine the extent to which we are the people of God. We must learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Disagreements do not necessarily lead to divisions. Disagreeableness frequently does.

Before we look at the reading from Revelation, think for just a moment about the Old Testament. What made Israelite worship unique was not *what* they did or *how* they did it. Other nations offered sacrifices, celebrated Sabbath, and had festivals corresponding to Israel's. *What made Israel's worship unique was her God!* And what was true for Old Testament Israel was true for New Testament Israel. This is why, as Paul urged his readers in Corinth to build one another up, he provides a window to the heart of their worship. The outsiders—the non-Christians—should witness what was happening and perhaps even join it. Paul states it this way in 1 Cor 14:25: “That person [the outsider] will bow down before God and worship Him, declaring, ‘God is really among you.’” *The beginning and end of worship is God, not us.*

The purpose of worship is God. The problem of worship is us. At its core, *worship is an encounter between a holy God and an unholy people.* Worship is an encounter between a God worthy of worship and a people unworthy to worship. It is only by God's grace that our worship is worthy. This means that *the essence of worship is surrender.* I need to repeat that. *The essence of worship is surrender.* This is the true worship war—not our disagreements over *how* to worship, but whether or not we will surrender *our* will to *His* will.

The countless arguments over worship preferences in so many of our congregations are only symptoms of a serious sickness—*we are stricken with selfishness.* Whether we are pushing for substantial changes or resisting every one of them, the sickness is often the same. We find it difficult to surrender to Christ, and we find it difficult to surrender to Christians with whom we disagree. I fear that the most critical battle, the war for our wills, is often being lost. And the sad thing is, in the midst of our fussing and feuding, we fail to see where the key battle is being waged.

Worship should force us to stop caring so much about ourselves. It should push us to our knees in submission to the One who sits upon the throne—the Lord God Almighty! And worship should lift our eyes toward others whose needs and desires, not our own, should be the compelling motivation for our thoughts and actions.

In the fourth chapter of Revelation, we are taken into the throne-room of the universe. Here we see that God's sovereignty—specifically, that He is holy, almighty, and eternal—that His sovereignty is already fully acknowledged in heaven. This, then, is the true reality that must in the end also prevail on earth. John was taken up into heaven to see that God's throne is the ultimate reality behind all earthly appearances. And, as God's will is done in heaven, so it must come to be done on earth. In chapter five, it is Jesus Christ who brings God's sovereignty into effect on earth. The worship of the One seated on the throne leads to the worship of the Lamb, and the worship of the Lamb leads to the worship of *both* the One seated on the throne and the Lamb *together*:

^{5:13}Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,
“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped (NRSV).

It is because we owe our salvation to Jesus Christ that He is worthy of our worship. All of the divine functions in relation to the world—as Savior, Lord, and Judge—were exercised by Jesus, of course on God’s behalf. Or, another way of saying that, God—the One seated on the throne—manifested His saving sovereignty through Jesus Christ. It is because God is our creator and our savior that He is the one and only worthy object of worship. *The beginning and end of worship is God, not us.*

From chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, we see three primary forms of what it means to worship God: (1) a realization of His glorious holiness, (2) a recognition of our utter dependence on God for our very existence, for He is the creator and we are His creation, and (3) a reception of His salvation through the slaughtered Lamb, Jesus Christ. The heavenly worship is the heart of all reality: *everything exists ultimately to glorify God.* To complete this picture of worship, I would add Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians—particularly 1 Cor 11 through 14—concerning the “one another” dimension of worship to God. As we direct our worship upward to God, we also direct our worship outward to our brothers and sisters in Christ. The result of such an upward and outward focus is inward transformation. Through the exercise of God’s Spirit and through the encouragement of God’s people, we are inwardly changed.

If we want to change our worship, I suggest that we start where change is most needed: the worshippers need to change. Worship should force us to stop caring so much about ourselves. The Lion of Judah became the Lamb of God—Jesus Christ conquered by surrendering. The slaughtered Lamb yielded to the will of the One who sits on the throne, and the slaughtered Lamb yielded to the need of sinful humanity. Like the Lamb, we must learn to surrender. *We will never understand or experience the heart of worship until we surrender.* We must surrender to the Lamb, and we must surrender to the followers of the Lamb.

*The key to worship is not **what** we do or **how** we do it, but to **whom** we surrender.* For the people of God, worship sometimes takes place despite what happens in the assemblies we attend. If it is God for whom our soul thirsts, if it is His kingdom and His righteousness for which we seek first and only, if it is the bread of heaven on which we hunger to feed our souls, then all these things will be granted to us—and it will be the God of the universe and His Lamb to whom our worship ascends.

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