

The Communion of Worship
Revelation 5:6-14

Sermon

Hobart, September 2nd, 2012

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Revelation 5:6-14

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“You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it.

For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

¹⁰ And you have caused them to become a Kingdom of priests for our God.

And they will reign* on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. ¹² And they sang in a mighty chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—
to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and blessing.”

¹³ And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb forever and ever.”

¹⁴ And the four living beings said, “Amen!” And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped the Lamb.

* Greek *which are the seven spirits*.

* Some manuscripts read *they are reigning*.

INTRODUCTION:

I. TODAY I'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT WORSHIP

A. FIRST OF ALL TO ASK THE QUESTION,

1. What is worship?

B. THEN TO ASK:

1. How do we ensure our worship is appropriate, truly worshipful, fulfilling its God given purpose?
2. How much importance does tradition play compared with relevance to our time, place and culture?
 - a) For instance in matters of music and liturgy
 - b) Some focus on music as the main part of worship,
 - c) Others in trying to be contemporary and relative to our culture, might substitute cupcakes and soft drink for the bread and wine
 - d) Or hold church services in a café or pub
3. What about the balance in worship between focusing on the worshiper and the one we worship, between personal and corporate worship?
4. What about differences in worship between various denominations?
 - a) Some groups won't allow other Christians to participate in Communion with them

C. VERY SADLY IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAVE BEEN WHAT HAS BEEN TERMED, "WORSHIP WARS"

1. We spent a couple of years ourselves with our worship leaders meeting together regularly to work our way peacefully and hopefully successfully through the issues surrounding choice of hymns and our worship services
2. Many churches have divided over such matters

- a) Some have ended up with two or more separate worship services for different groups in their congregation
 - b) One of the first things we tend to notice and report back on when visiting other congregations, particularly those of our own denomination, is their style of worship
 - c) We hear comments like;
 - (1) It felt like going back into the 60's
 - (2) Or it was so loud and intense that I got a headache or had to leave
 - (3) Or it was so ritualistic it didn't seem relevant
3. And what about the many people who classify themselves as Christians—but rarely go to a church at all

S.P.S:

A. SO LET US HAVE A LOOK AT THE TOPIC OF WORSHIP

- 1. And see what we can learn on this vital aspect of Christian life

B. PRAYER

BODY:

II. WHAT IS WORSHIP?

A. LET'S START BY DISCUSSING SOME BASIC QUESTIONS REGARDING WORSHIP AND CHURCH SERVICES:

B. FIRST: WHY DO YOU COME TO CHURCH?

- 1. What do you expect to be included in a church service?
- 2. Why?

C. WHY DO WE SING HYMNS?

1.

D. WHY DO WE PRAY?

1. What sort of prayers are important?

a)

E. WHY DO WE HAVE SCRIPTURE READINGS?

1.

F. WHY DO WE HAVE SERMONS AND STUDY THE SCRIPTURES?

1.

G. WHAT ELSE IS IMPORTANT AND WHY?

III. MODERN WORSHIP

A. ROBERT OSBORNE WROTE AN INSIGHTFUL PAPER ON THIS TOPIC A FEW YEARS BACK

1. He talked about how the Baby boomers revolutionised worship in many churches

a) But questioned whether, like in most revolutions, in an attempt to transform and change the old for the better, whether we have run rough shod over and ignored much of the wisdom and lessons about worship learned down through the centuries.

2. He wrote;

The “worship revolution” of the past few decades has brought to mind the truth that revolutions can be destructive even while they attempt to create new possibilities. Treasures can be lost. A lot of the wisdom of the past can be buried under the rubble of deconstruction. The following thoughts are an attempt at rummaging through the rubble, of searching for the treasures of the past before the “battle of the worship bands” forced us to envision our worship of God as something we critique by consumer values and popular tastes.¹

¹ Robert Osborne, “The Lord’s Supper as the Heart of Christian Worship”; p.3, <http://robertosborne21.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/8-the-lords-supper-as-the-heart-of-worship.pdf>

3. He then goes on to ask some basic questions;

The questions must be asked and asked rightly: what exactly is worship? What is a *liturgy* and how does it reflect our spiritual paradigm? What might be the strengths and weaknesses of the various worship forms, whether liturgical, charismatic, seeker-sensitive, emergent or other forms of worship?

How does our worship express our understanding of God, our identity, our hope, and our understanding of the church? What is the nature of the current worship upheaval? Is it about cultural identity, or does it have deeper roots in theology and spirituality? Will the tensions die through time or will we continue to experience some sort of perpetual fragmentation? What is the essential nature of this issue? What is worship is for anyway? And what exactly is our idea of the church? The questions should cause us to search for some solid ground. An adequate theology of worship will certainly begin with a biblical frame of reference, but it will also seek understanding from the practical experience of the church's long story. Just how has the church worshipped through the generations?

To this great question, the look back, we must add an understanding and sensitivity for the culture in which we now find ourselves, the look around. How do our current forms of worship reflect our time, our place, and our particular humanity?²

4. He goes on to point out that we usually base our worship choices on one particular priority

A theology of worship will lead us into a dialogue between three necessary focal points:

first, the truth and experience of God as modeled and taught in Scripture;

second, the wisdom of the Christian past as it understood the practice of worship;

and third, our present cultural forms and ways of being.

A dialogue between these three focal points is necessary, for in seeking to create a theology of worship, we need to ask more than one question.

We will always need to ask truth questions (how can we confirm and rehearse the Christian story?), tradition questions (what are the enduring

² Osborne, p.1

lessons of the church at worship?), and mission questions (how do we build bridges to our surrounding culture?).

I would suggest that a theology of worship requires all three focal points in interplay. We reduce our experience and understanding of worship to the degree that we operate from one focal point only. Worship gets flattened out when we fail to ask the appropriate questions, when we fail to be reflective on what it is we are doing in the act of worship.

It must be noted that particular worship paradigms almost always operate out of one of these focal points. For instance, in many evangelical churches self-described as seeker-sensitive, liturgy is constructed around the mission question.³ By this I mean that when applying the missional question to church worship, “accessibility” becomes the assumed integrating motif. For many churches with this mindset, the “styling” of their worship is the way they seek to signal an open and inviting attitude. The liturgy of such churches is crafted with a view to what connects with the intended audience.

Now I am appreciative of this way of designing liturgies having twice planted new churches with contemporary worship styling; and there is no getting around the fact that I am a baby-boomer defined by my rock music and blue jeans. I am a child of my age who identifies with my culture. But it nevertheless must be said that, in light of truth and tradition questions, reducing worship to the question of cultural identification only rather creates a new flatness that will inevitably be revealed in time.

Reducing worship to one focal point – missional openness expressed as cultural styling – reveals the a-historical bent of this generation’s habit of thought, surely a loss for us who have been given this great big historical church as our resource and foundation. Although there is an upside in subjecting worship to the mission/culture question, the unintended downside is that our worship too easily loses the richness of Biblical and historical understanding. The development of missional thinking in the western church, as helpful as it has been, has been at least partially

³ It is important to note that Leslie Newbigin was the seminal thinker in this regard. Among his defining writings were *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989) and *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (1986). Newbigin’s writing influenced a way of newly conceptualizing the western church, one which took its missionary posture seriously. Although Newbigin, to my knowledge, did not overtly push the discussion in this direction, the recognition of the missionary location of the church in western culture has surely had an effect on changing worship forms. What I want to suggest is that the proper recognition of the church as a missional force should not necessarily mean that tradition and theology should be absent from the process of liturgical design.

responsible for this shift in thinking about our worship. The missional question subtly takes precedence over truth and tradition questions.⁴

B. ROBERT OSBORNE THEN TALKS ABOUT THE PROBLEMS THAT COME WHEN CULTURAL RELEVANCE PLAYS TO MUCH OF A ROLE IN THE WAY WE WORSHIP;

When cultural questions are the only criteria for the reformation of worship the inevitable effect is a polarization of Christian communities along the questions of cultural preference. This creates a never-ending fragmentation. For when culture is defined as musical styling, as so often happens, the Christian community finds itself divided into cultural (i.e., generational) camps. In this sense, our style of worship becomes the new point of demarcation that divides the one people of God into its various camps and divisions.

Simply put, worship (especially as music) has become a new stress point for the local gathering of believers. The new anxiety for many churches is not the cultural entrapment of its people, nor persecution from hostile forces, nor theological or ethical degradation. No, the new stress point has become the simple act of the church at worship. Churches practically agonize over the difficulties of reconciling the generations. The first half-hour of the Sunday service seems to be the test for staying together. The church fragments as “targeted” audiences become more and more unlike each other in their cultural identities. When worship is defined by cultural questions the gulf between the generations seems to widen.⁵

1. This is clearly seriously and fundamentally at odds with the whole purpose of church fellowship and worship.
 - a) As Paul emphasized to the Ephesians and others, the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles into the one body of Christ reveals what God’s will is, and shows us how we should live in unity in order to effectively function as the body of Christ and be an appropriate witness to the divided world around us.
 - (1) **We ought not be living and perpetuating the divisions of the world but showing the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit**

⁴ Osborne, p.2

⁵ Osborne, p.2-3

b) It isn't easy, but the Holy Spirit leads us and empowers us to be one with God, and with each other

(1) To find ways of bringing the generations together, whether it be in corporate worship, or our every day Christian lives (which are also to be continual acts of worship, honouring, revealing and bringing glory to God)

2. The music, the hymns and songs we utilise in worship also need to be chosen wisely and kept in context.

a) Osborne adds;

I would venture to say that something fundamental has been lost to us if we accept this way of thinking. I would venture to say that worship is just too meaningfully rich and complex to be reduced to musical styling alone. Worship belongs to the whole church, and it is best expressed when the church is wholly engaged. "Worship wars" are simply not acceptable; when the body of Christ is divided on questions of style it is simply not experiencing worship as it should.

For those of us given the task of leading the church in its worship, we must find a way to bring the whole body of Christ together in common adoration of the Living Lord. We must find a way to bring diverse and heterogeneous generations and cultures and mindsets together in the act of worship.

My hope is that the rekindling of authentic worship would be realized in our time, and that in so doing we will find ourselves in fulfillment of the great commission: the gathering of a people from every (generational) tribe and language for the worship of Christ and God.⁶

C. OSBORNE REFERS TO REVELATION 4 AND 5 AS EXEMPLIFYING WHAT TRUE WORSHIP IS ALL ABOUT

Revelation 5:6-14

⁶ Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered, but it was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which represent the sevenfold Spirit* of God that is sent out into every part of the earth. ⁷ He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. ⁸ And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a

⁶ Osborne, p.3

* Greek *which are the seven spirits*.

harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people. ⁹ And they sang a new song with these words:

"You are worthy to take the scroll

and break its seals and open it.

For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God

from every tribe and language and people and nation.

¹⁰ And you have caused them to become

a Kingdom of priests for our God.

And they will reign* on the earth."

¹¹ Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. ¹² And they sang in a mighty chorus:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—

to receive power and riches

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"Blessing and honor and glory and power

belong to the one sitting on the throne

and to the Lamb forever and ever."

¹⁴ And the four living beings said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped the Lamb.

D. WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT WORSHIP HERE?

1. What is involved in this graphic, idealistic scene of worship?

a) Bowing down

b) Prayers of God's people being brought before the throne

c) Songs of praise

* Some manuscripts read *they are reigning*.

2. What are they focused on?

- a) God and the Lamb
- b) Jesus, and what he has done for the salvation of his people in bringing people from all nations and peoples to be a people for God
- c) The Spirit of God sent to every part of the earth
- d) On the future inheritance and role of the Lamb

E. NOTICE V 13;

¹³ And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

- 1. This is the unified worship that God has worked towards from the beginning
- 2. Everyone, everywhere, from all down through the ages, unified in loving, worship of God

F. THIS HELPS CENTRE AND PRIORITISE OUR WORSHIP APPROPRIATELY

- 1. Remembering it is about God first
 - a) About who he is, and how he has revealed himself, and acted for us in and through his Son and his Spirit
 - b) How he wants us unified through our thankfulness and worship towards him
- 2. This should help us in choosing the songs we sing
 - a) In what we pray about
 - b) As well as the choosing of special annual days and times of worship we choose to assemble for during the year

(1) **And what they should focus on**

3. Osborne;

For those of us given the task of leading the church in its worship, we must find a way to bring the whole body of Christ together in common adoration of the Living Lord. We must find a way to bring diverse and heterogeneous generations and cultures and mindsets together in the act of worship. My hope is that the rekindling of authentic worship would be realized in our

time, and that in so doing we will find ourselves in fulfillment of the great commission: the gathering of a people from every (generational) tribe and language for the worship of Christ and God.

I believe that Revelation 4-5 (especially 5:9-14) provides us a way to model this way of unified worship, and that it will lead us back to the *eucharistic* center of Christian worship, the themes and attitudes and practices that emerge around the revelation of Christ for us, with us, in us.⁷

G. EUCHARIST, MEANS “THANKS”

1. The Lord’s Supper, “Communion” often called “Eucharist” is the one commanded act of corporate worship that Christ gave to us
2. As the worship we read about in Revelation 5 does, the “Lord’s Supper” focuses on Jesus Christ, the Lamb, the centre of our faith
3. It goes beyond time and culture, age groups, personal focuses and desires
4. It focuses and unites us, and leads us into the heart of Christian worship

H. WHEN WE CHOOSE HOW TO WORSHIP

1. We do need to keep in mind those we are seeking reach missionally with the gospel
2. We do need to keep our culture in mind
3. Osborne brings this out,

Culture is the moving construct of relative and temporal values, of moral and preservative goodness, and of structural evil. Culture is good, bad, and indifferent. It is always in flux, always negotiating its way around our basic human needs, our ways of explaining and creating meaning, our hope for goodness and our tendency toward evil. Cultures enshrine this mix in symbols and practices, institutions and ways of being. With this idea of culture in mind, the tension I want to bring out in the worship question is not between truth and error, nor between the pure gospel and its syncretistic adaptations.

⁷ Osborne, p.4

The tension I am pointing out is much simpler: it is a tension of what is relative to what is enduring. We can and should accept that worship expressions will morph through time as culture changes. This is legitimate and necessary. Worship forms will change as human cultures change through time, place, and experience.

But the second half of the synthesis, the theological, is something we must pay attention to if our worship is to remain the expression of our relationship to the eternal truth of God and Christ. Worship must carry within it an enduring theological core.⁸

4. Osborne talks about how a deeper theological appreciation of worship, particularly of the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist helps us deal with these tensions and balances in worship practices, and get closer to the heart of the worship God wants us to participate in to his glory, and our benefit personally, congregationally, and as the entire body of Christ

In the present state of flux, here is where we ground our worship in the most enduring theme, and here is where we learn to theologize before we stylize. In doing so, [we] ...re-center our worship around Christ and the meaning of his cross, the most central themes of Christian truth and piety.

The Biblical genius allows diversity and variance in our expression.

5. He says that the important thing

“has to do with a way of seeing worship, especially worship that is sacrificial and Christ-centered, for this is the heart of all true worship.”⁹

6. In the future I plan to go deeper into some of the important principles about worship that we learn from Paul's teachings about the Lord's Supper.

⁸ Osborne, p.3

⁹ Osborne, p.4

IV. TODAY BEFORE WE PARTAKE IN THE LORD'S SUPPER

A. I'D LIKE TO PICK UP ANOTHER CLEAR POINT THAT COMES FROM WHAT WE READ IN REVELATION 5:

1. That can easily be overlooked
2. The picture of Revelation 5 is one of communal worship
 - a) In v8-10 we see the 24 elders presenting the prayers of all the saints together, and singing a new song
3. Then we read in verse 12-13

¹¹ Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. ¹² And they sang in a mighty chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—

to receive power and riches

and wisdom and strength

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¹³ And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power

belong to the one sitting on the throne

and to the Lamb forever and ever.”

B. IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTICE THAT COMMUNION, AND ALL WORSHIP HAS A COMMUNAL FOCUS;

1. We worship as individuals yes
 - a) We give of our own hearts and minds, prayer, praise and thanksgiving to God as we take the bread and the wine
2. But we do it in communion
 - a) In communion with God, who is a communion of Father, Son and Spirit
 - (1) Each of whom are one with the others, and who act always in union and communion

3. And very importantly, we take the bread and wine in communion with one another

a) As members of one body

b) As part of the church for whom Jesus gave himself to create, liberate and transform through his Spirit

4. Laurence Stookey in his wonderful book, “Eucharist-Christ’s Feast with the Church” writes about...

C. THE IMPORTANCE OF A STRONG ECCLESIOLOGY;

1. in other words a clear understanding of the church and its God given existence and role in his plan

2. Stookey writes;

Sharing in the sacrament is one of the marks of being the church.

A strong ecclesiology is necessary to prevent the Eucharist from being a privatistic exercise of spiritual interaction between God and believers singly, on the one hand, and from degenerating into “refreshment in church” on the other. The former problem has been pervasive among both Catholics and Protestants until recently. Now, having been challenged in many quarters, the individual bent threatens to give way to a well-meaning inclusivism that sees no reason whatsoever for differentiating between who is invited to the Lord’s Table and who is invited to the coffee hour.

On the one side, those who see the Eucharist only as a one-to-one encounter with God do not perceive that the sacrament is relational. What needs to be added to their understanding is that it creates relationships among all those at the table as well as between each communicant and God. Those who are drawn to God are also drawn together around the banquet. Further, the sharing and interaction experienced at the table is the model and motivation for the church’s mission in the world.¹⁰

3. He goes on to point out that those who share in the bread and wine need to remember the role we play as committed members of Christ’s body.

a) It isn’t just a social club, or casual group of friends meeting to further their own interests

¹⁰ Laurence Hull Stookey, “Eucharist-Christ’s Feast with the Church”, Abingdon Press, 1993, p.105

4. Stookey adds;

Too often communicants, even when totally surrounded by fellow believers, view the moment of reception, in particular, as “my private time with God.” Complained one Methodist when the Wesleyan practice of singing hymns during the distribution was being reinstated: “How dare the congregation sing while I am trying to commune with my God at the altar.”

Through the Eucharist, God struggles to teach us about community in its broadest reaches—the community of humanity, indeed the community of the cosmos. But this divine word to us will not be clearly heard until the church recovers the deep conviction that it is not an assortment of individuals at prayer in the same space, but rather is itself a community of prayer, at times gathered in one place but more usually scattered abroad in daily life like a bit of yeast that leavens the whole lump of dough.¹¹

CONCLUSION:

A. CLEARLY WORSHIP IS ABOUT GOD

1. It is about acknowledging, recognising and praising God for all he is, and all he has done
 - a) About what Jesus has done for us as God, and as one of us for God
2. It is about fellowship
 - a) Recognising that Christianity, the Church and worship are not about single individuals being focused on a one on one relationship with God alone
 - b) Recognising that God himself is three united in one
 - (1) **And that he calls us to love him and our neighbor, not just ourselves**
 - c) Worship is about God’s people living the life of koinonia, love, oneness, communion, participating together in the worship of God

B. WE WILL SING ANOTHER HYMN

¹¹ Stookey, p.106

1. Then participate together in Communion, the heart of worship, the Lord's Supper

C. PRAYER

Lord's Supper

D. BEFORE WE TAKE COMMUNION

1. I'd like to read part of Robert Osborne's enlightening commentary on our passage from Revelation 5

Eucharistic worship is a foretaste of the eschatological worship of heaven, as the revelator John shows us in Revelation 4-5. This is a very helpful place to consider worship themes and theology.

In this passage, the heavenly community begins its worship around the throne of God's authority (Rev. 4); the themes that dominate the worshippers' song are themes of creation and power, and God is revealed as transcendent and sovereign. But this is not the climax of this heavenly worship; the heavenly congregation seems to pause after this initial theme is sung. They pause because a crisis is uncovered. In this richly visual and suggestive scene, we see and hear that there is no one worthy to break the seals and open the scroll of human history.

We experience with John and the heavenly choir the recognition that history itself cannot conclude without a further point of revelation, a further insight into God beyond his power and greatness, beyond the acknowledgement that he is creator of all things. John himself, the visionary participant, deeply experiences this crisis, an experience we too are enriched by. We might well consider it as the central crisis of worship, the central crisis of religion and spirituality. God has been acknowledged and this is good; a song has been elicited because this is our proper response. But this is not all for humanity is still in need: things are yet unresolved. We have been led to the crisis of human history, the crisis of human purpose. The question is then asked: "who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll? (Rev. 5:2).

What is fascinating for us as we consider the question of Christian worship is that it is at this point where the song shifts in its focus and becomes more centrally Christian. In this moment of crisis, John sees a Lamb, looking like it has been slain but nevertheless alive. The Lamb, slain but alive, then takes his place at the center of heaven's throne. The picture is telling: deity is revealed in human weakness, the lamb is God the Son. John's visionary

telling expresses the heart of the gospel story, the crucified and risen Christ.

We see in one image the gospel's basic revelation: Jesus as God for man and man for God. Creation's purpose, to reveal the Christ of God as the Lamb of God for us, is now in focus. For John, as now for all of heaven, this Lordly Lamb is the only one worthy or able to complete history's purpose.

And here is the point I want to make: upon this revelation, the song erupts in a new direction. The focus is now upon the Lamb who was slain (Rev. 5), who is worthy because of his redeeming sacrifice for men, to receive all glory and honor and power and praise. The song moves from God as creator to God as redeemer. And it is this clearer focus on God as redeemer that makes worship centrally Christian.

We might conclude from this passage that there are two foci for faithful Biblical worship: first, the worship of God because he is God (creator, sovereign), but second and more distinctively Christian, the worship of Christ because he is God for us (redeemer, savior). The song is sung: "worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (Rev. 5:12)

There is probably more theology here than we could ever hope to exhaust. But my point is quite simple: the communion meal is the best context for immersing ourselves in this fundamental Christian understanding. If in the act of worship we learn our faith, then the focus of our worship must be essentially Christian. God's greatness is certainly a valid Biblical theme for worship but it is not distinctively Christian (for Muslims too, God is great). What is distinctively Christian, and therefore to be held at the center, is the revelation that Christ is God for us: born, crucified, and risen for us. This indeed is the new song (Rev. 5:9).

We learn Christian truth by the ways we focus our worship. The path of Revelation 4 and 5 shows us that the worship of heaven begins in the celebration of God's greatness in creation – everything that has breath owes its existence to the one on the throne, the eternal God.

But the focus of heaven's worship, its dénouement, is not in God's greatness but rather in God's love expressed in weakness. The focus is the Son in his redeeming work and our inclusion in that work. And this is the theme of the communion meal.¹²

¹² Osborne, p.6-7

V. BREAD

A.

VI. WINE:

A.