

Worship Is the Gospel in Motion¹

Chapter 6

We saw in chapter 2 that the epicenter from which biblical worship flows is an event. In this chapter we will reflect on how the life, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ are central to the experience of Christian worship.²

Worship is not a mere memory or a matter of looking back to a historic event (that is an Enlightenment notion). Rather, worship is the action that brings the Christ event into the experience of the community gathered in the name of Jesus. Three implications to this understanding of worship are: (1) worship recapitulates the Christ event, (2) worship actualizes the church, and (3) worship anticipates the kingdom.

RECAPITULATION OF THE CHRIST EVENT IN WORSHIP

The word recapitulate simply means to “sum up” or to “repeat.” In worship there is a summing up of those events in history that constitute the source of the church’s salvation.³ In worship we rehearse the Gospel story. We rehearse the Creation, Fall, Incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, and the consummation of all things. Therefore, our worship, whether baptism, preaching, or Eucharist, proclaims Jesus Christ and his saving reality again and again. In this action a recapitulation takes place on three levels: in heaven, on earth, and in our hearts.

The recapitulation that takes place in heaven occurs in the everlasting worship of the Father because of the work of the Son. Jesus served the Father by destroying the works of the devil (1 John 3:8) and thus reconciled the Creator and his creation through his death (Rom. 5:10). Since Jesus offered himself to save humanity, he has returned to God the glory of all his works. This offering is his “one sacrifice” in which “he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Heb. 10:14).

For this reason the heavens ring with worship. Both Isaiah and John attest to this heavenly worship (Isa. 6; Rev. 4–5). The description in the Apocalypse seems to suggest that the entire

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²For theology of worship see James Empereur, *Models of Liturgical Theology* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove, 1987); Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984); David N. Power, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy* (New York: Pueblo, 1984); and Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

³ For a detailed discussion of this point see Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), 21.

creation of God (angels, archangels, apostles, martyrs, and the entire communion of saints, material and immaterial) offers unceasing praise to God. And here, in this heavenly worship, the central focus is on the “Lamb,” who stands at the “center of the throne.” All gather around him in worship and song (Rev. 5:6–9).

Some scholars believe that the structure of the book of Revelation was based on early Christian worship.⁴ Whether it was or not, it at least appears that John recognized the need to pattern earthly worship after the heavenly (Rev. 4–5). Our worship is like heavenly worship in that it centers around Jesus and his work. In worship we “sum up” or “recapitulate” the work of Christ. That one unrepeatable event in history is made real again and again through the power of proclamation (by the Holy Spirit) that confronts us with the reality of new life in Jesus Christ.

This is not, as late medieval theology suggested, a re-sacrifice of Christ. It is instead the continual recognition of the once-for-all offering of Jesus Christ. In worship we recall the Christ event that accomplished our redemption, and we offer our praise and adoration to the Father through the accomplished work of the Son. Thus, the character of Christian worship is informed and shaped by the retelling of the Christ event.

The third aspect of recapitulation is concerned with making certain that what happens in heaven and on earth happens in the heart. The relationship between the eternal and the internal must never be neglected in worship. What we do externally should signify what is happening internally. In worship we offer ourselves as Paul admonished: “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom. 12:1).

The experience of worship as a recapitulation of the Christ event brings heaven, earth, and the believer together in a single whole. The church joins in that great chorus of voices to offer praise to the Father through the Son by the Spirit, and in this action the church is actualized.

ACTUALIZATION OF THE CHURCH IN WORSHIP

The image that best describes what happens when the church comes together for worship is taken from the congregation of Israel at Mount Sinai. Here Israel through the covenant became the people of God. The technical term used to describe these people is the *qahal Yahweh*. They are the assembly saved from Egypt; thus they become as this term implies “the assembly of God.” The special characteristic of this assembly is worship. Thus, the five elements of worship discussed in chapter 3—divine initiative, the structure of responsibility, the proclamation of the Word, the assent of the people, and the act of ratification—characterized this assembly. These

⁴ See Massey H. Shepherd, *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse* (Richmond: John Knox, 1960).

elements define the nature of the gathering in which Israel as God's special people become actualized.

Similarly, the church is an assembly gathered for worship. The church constitutes the people of God on earth, assembled in the name of Jesus. Like the nature of the people of Israel, the nature of this assembly is defined by an event. In this sense the church may be defined as the "people of the Christ event." Thus, when believers come together, the church, as the people of the Christ event, becomes a reality. One can say, "Here is the church," or, "Here are the people who belong to God" as a result of the Christ event. In this way the church is actualized.

The view that worship actualizes the church rests on two arguments. First, all the physical signs of Christ's presence in the church are evident. Second, these signs represent a spiritual reality.

First, the physical signs of Christ are evident in the variety of gifts and workings within the body. Each member of the body has his or her own gift (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 7:7). No one person fills all the offices or possesses all the gifts, but worship brings believers together and arranges them according to their functions. These people have the Word of God, through which God speaks to them. They also have the sacraments, baptism and Communion, which remind them of the purpose for which they have gathered. The point is that in these signs—people, offices, gifts, Word, sacraments—the church is present and visible.

Second, these signs communicate the spiritual reality they represent. God has made his material world in such a way that it could be the vehicle through which spiritual realities are realized. We see one thing, but we apprehend another. The offices and gifts are expressed through people, but through them we also see the ministry of Jesus Christ, who oversees the church, pastors the flock, and serves the church. In the Word we hear the voice of God. In baptism and the Eucharist we apprehend the cleansing of our sin and are nurtured in Christ.

In this way worship actualizes the church and becomes the means through which Christ, the head of the church, becomes present to his body. We dare not deny this physical side of spiritual communication where through the action of worship the triumphant presence of the risen Lord is actualized and the anticipation of his bodily return is celebrated.

ANTICIPATION OF THE KINGDOM IN WORSHIP

Because worship has to do with the Christ event, the eschatological hope for the consummation of the work of Christ cannot be neglected.⁵ Thus, worship expresses the tension between Christ's

⁵ Shepherd, *Paschal Liturgy*, 57ff., and Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 110ff

resurrection and his return. Although we celebrate the triumph of Jesus over the powers of sin and death, we acknowledge that the powers have not yet been put under the feet of Jesus completely. Therefore, in worship we raise a prophetic voice against the powers and express our hope in the future completion of Jesus' triumph over sin and death. This anticipatory note of worship is expressed in Word and sacrament.

In the Word, the kingdom is announced and proclaimed in the preaching of Christ. The earliest preaching included the insistence that Christ would come again as Judge and Savior. This same anticipation is expressed in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). The same theme is found in the institution of the Lord's Supper. Paul told the Corinthian church, "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). In the Eucharist the church prefigures the new creation. Here common elements—bread and wine—become the symbols of a new world. The partaking of the bread and wine by the people symbolizes the messianic banquet—the celebration of the new heavens and the new earth. Thus, worship transports the church from the earthly sphere to the heavens to join in that everlasting worship described by John (Rev. 4–5). In this way the church at worship displays its relationship to the age to come and derives from worship the power to live in this world now—in the tension between the Resurrection and the Second Coming, between promise and fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen that the focus and meaning of worship is rooted in the work of Christ. Thus, our worship to the Father is offered in and through Jesus Christ, who has accomplished redemption for the sake of and glory of the Father. Therefore, worship recapitulates the work of Christ by proclaiming it through Word and sacrament. In this action, the church (the body of Jesus) is actualized. That is, it comes together and can be seen and experienced in a visible and concrete manner. But the work of Jesus is not yet complete, so the church in worship acknowledges that it anticipates that final triumphant destruction of sin and death that will take place when Christ returns to consummate all things. In this way the church experiences worship as the Gospel in motion. Worship renewal cannot occur without the recovery of this primary principle in the mind, heart, and actions of the worshiping community.