

One of the great tragedies of the Enlightenment era is that the Bible, God's story, has been turned into a book of propositional statements. The modern method of learning is to set forth facts and then seek to prove those facts by reason and science. So we turned the elements of God's story into factual statements that we set out to prove. This intellectual Christianity spawned many expressions including intellectual worship. Intellectual worship is "to gather the people, do the preliminaries and get to what we're really here for—biblical facts presented by the sermon."

Another great tragedy of the Enlightenment era was the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. It opposed factualism and claimed truth was known in feeling, in intuition, in emotion. This view spawned a "feeling faith" and a worship that said, "gather the people, sing and get emotional then preach an emotional sermon and give an emotional invitation."

These two tragedies and their worship results—intellectual worship and emotional worship—spawned a new worship in the late twentieth century: contemporary worship. This combined "feeling" and "intellect"; it "feels God in the music" and "knows God in the teaching." So worship gathers the people to sing and learn, and if you are Pentecostal or Charismatic, worship adds on a time for healing prayer at the end.

### God's Story

Biblical worship is really none of the above. Biblical worship does God's story. God's story is not this or that story contained in Scripture. God's story is the story that Scripture tells from Genesis through Revelation.

The story is about the Triune God who lives in eternal community and needs nothing. But God is so overflowing with love that God creates a world to be the dwelling place of His glory and a people to share fellowship in His very triune life.

**Robert Webber,**  
*a theologian well known for his work on worship and the early church, died of pancreatic cancer on April 27, 2007 at his home in Sawyer, Michigan. He was 73. At the time of his death, Webber was the William R. And Geraldyn B. Myers professor of ministry at Northern Seminary in Lombard, IL. He was also the president of the Institute for Worship Studies in Jacksonville, Florida, and professor of theology emeritus at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. (See end of article for more information on Webber.)*

*Excerpts taken from Christianity Today, Volume 51, April (Web-only), 2007. Copyright © 2007 Christianity Today.*

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But God's creatures rebel. God's creation becomes dysfunctional. The world and all creatures are separated from God and cannot live in His love. And no one can fix it. So God becomes involved in history to restore the world and to establish a people of His own. In Abraham, He establishes His family; in Isaac, a tribe; in Israel, a nation; in David, a Kingdom. But all these people, like Adam and Eve, fail again and again.

In the fullness of time, God embraces His creation and all His creatures by an incarnate entrance into their lostness and suffering. He then takes their rebellion to the cross, dies to destroy death, rises to bring all creatures and all creation to new life and establishes His earthly people, the Church. Now He moves creation toward its ultimate destination in the new heavens and the new earth, where creatures and creation will dwell in the praise of the triune God forever.

### **Historical Recitation**

Worship recites God's saving activity in history. Both the worship of Israel and the worship of the Church recite God's saving actions in creeds, antiphons, songs, palms and preaching. Look, for example, at the creed in Deuteronomy 26:5-9 and the creed of 1 Corinthians 15:1-6; look at the Antiphons in Joshua 4:6-7, 24:14-28 and the heavenly antiphons recorded in Revelation 5; look at the song of Miriam in Exodus 15 and the song of Jesus in Philippians 2:6-11; the whole book of Deuteronomy is a historical recitation sermon as is Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36).

### **Dramatic Re-enactment**

Also, the worship of both Israel and the Church is characterized by a dramatic re-enactment of God's great works of salvation. Consider for example the drama of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16:1-34 and the drama of Christ, our High Priest, recorded by the writer of Hebrews 6:11-10:39. Then, too, the drama of the Passover, instituted in Exodus 12 and still practiced today among the Jews, and the fulfillment of all the Passover images in the Lord's Supper

(1 Corinthians 11:17-26) and at the end of history in the Great drama of the Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7).

### **Counter-imagination**

The Church lives by this great drama and is shaped by a counter- imagination of the world. The Church's worship is no mere intellectual fact, no mere personal experience, no mere focus on the self. It is instead a recitation and re-enactment of the mighty deeds of God restoring the world to Himself by His own two hands—the incarnate Word and the life-giving Spirit—resulting in a vision of history, of the world and our place in it that is counter to all the visions of the world held by the world.

It is the true story of the world, the truth about the meaning of human existence. You don't prove it with reason or science. You don't make it real by experience. Worship is not factualizing it or feeling it. It doesn't need reason. It doesn't need feeling. Worship just does it. The drama of the world, that is.

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*Dr. Webber authored **Common Roots** (1978), a book that examined the impact of second-century Christianity on the modern church's life, worship, witness, and spirituality. He also wrote **Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church** (1985). In recent years, Webber sought to show the increasing relevance of patristic thought in a postmodern age. His more recent books include **Ancient-Future Faith**, **Ancient-Future Time**, **Ancient-Future Evangelism**, **The Younger Evangelicals**, and **The Divine Embrace**. In 2006, he organized and edited the "Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future," a document intended "to restore the priority of the divinely inspired biblical story of God's acts in history."*

*During the latter half of his life, Webber took a special interest in Christian worship practices. Webber wrote more than 40 books on the topic of worship, focusing on how the worship practices of the ancient church have value for the church today.*

Check out the following site for more of Robert Webber's resources: [www.ancientfutureworship.com](http://www.ancientfutureworship.com)

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