

Aligning With the Star

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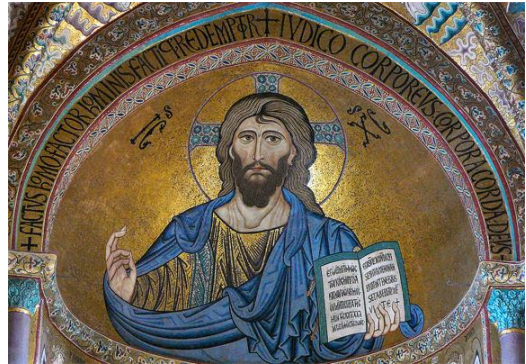
The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

January 6, 2016, Feast of the Epiphany

St. Irenaeus stated, “God did not ask us to follow him because he needed our help, but because he knew that loving him would make us whole.” In fact, St. Irenaeus embraced the perspective held by all the other Church Fathers that in worship we are divinized. What is divinization? God

condescended to us in the incarnation, so we could fully participate in the divine nature. Or, more simply, God became human so humans could

become God. In adoration, right worship, we become reconciled to the one who made us and loves us. And we become divinized; we grow in Christ-likeness, or godliness.



This is a seminal idea from scripture and the Church Fathers: humans were created to offer right praise to God. We who follow Christ have the great privilege of engaging the world, telling the world its true story, and bringing it to the right worship of the only God who is ultimately true, good and beautiful. This is why the focus on right worship is at the very core of the Christian faith!

IWS Professor Dr. Reggie Kidd wrote the following:

“A theology that cannot be preached is not worth having,” I once heard a preacher declare. I can’t argue with that. Truth that can’t be applied isn’t worth bothering about... The whole premise of Christianity is that to do us any good God’s love had to come down from heaven, right here to where we live. Here’s a corollary to the preacher’s quip: a theology that cannot be *sung* is not worth having either. Authentic Christian faith is not merely believed. Nor is it merely acted upon. It is sung—with utter joy sometimes, in uncontrollable tears sometimes, but it is sung.¹

20th century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar advocated for a “kneeling theology” instead of the usual “sitting theology.” This gets at the same point being made by Dr. Kidd—the best theology derives from a posture of worship, because that most appropriately reveals who God is, a community of worshipping love.

In his great, multi-volume work, *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar proposes a reversal of the order of the classical transcendentals, typically listed in order as truth, goodness and

beauty. In describing his aesthetical theology, Balthasar suggests a re-ordering to beauty, goodness and truth. He posits that the beauty of God (which is objective in his theology) arrests us (or captures us), claims us, and then sends us on mission to discover and share the goodness and truth of God with the entire created order. Together, beauty, goodness and truth reveal the very nature of God manifested uniquely and ultimately in Jesus the Christ. Worship Arts are used by the Holy Spirit as a means of encountering that transcendent, objective beauty of God, which leads to and reveals his goodness and truth to the entire world.

Today is the great feast of Epiphany. On this day we commemorate the journey of the magi to visit the newborn King of Israel. Who were these magi? They are described as wise men, astronomers, astrologers, star gazers, magicians, perhaps kings. We just don't know who they were or where exactly they came from. Notice that these magi were blithely indifferent to the power mongers of the time, men like Caesar Augustus and Herod the Not-So-Great of Jerusalem. Rather, they were searching the night skies for the evidence of God. And what do they discover, but a new alignment in the heavens, a star, that tells of the arrival of a new king in Israel.



The magi may have interpreted this heavenly appearance as a portent, not just for Israel, but for the whole world. Why else would it be high in the sky for the entire world to see? The star was an indication that heaven and earth had come back into alignment, an alignment that had been lost to sin, rebellion, warfare, the lust after power, pride, pleasure and wealth. Sin affected not just mankind, but the entire cosmos. The magi saw the star, this new cosmic alignment, *and they followed* it to find what: the new King of the Jews? Yes. But in their adoration, these kings also inchoately proclaimed him as their king, THE King of Kings as well. And they gave him gifts, gifts of profound value and deep prophetic meaning: gold because he was royalty; frankincense because he was divinity, and myrrh, because he was a sacrifice, THE sacrifice for all time. The magi were prayerfully looking for the right thing; they were attending to the right story. They were seeking to align themselves with this great new alignment of heaven and earth that was revealed prophetically in the heavenly alignment of the star.

We worship leaders have the awesome privilege of inviting others to follow the star, to participate in the great realignment of heaven and earth achieved by the incarnate Son of God, to enter into the right worship of God and to be rightly aligned unto him.



Let me revisit the perspective of von Balthasar on the prominence of the beauty of God. He describes the beauty of God as manifested ultimately and perfectly in Jesus the Christ himself. Again, this is not beauty that is in the eye of the beholder. Rather, this is objective beauty, like the beauty of the star that sends wise men and kings on a journey to the Son if they have eyes to see. It is the objective beauty of the incarnate Son himself who arrests us, claims us and sends us on mission with his message of love and reconciliation and realignment to a world in such desperate need of that message. As worship leaders we are called to embody the beauty of worship as participation in that story of God's saving work, that realignment of heaven and earth in Jesus the Christ. Right worship is the submission of humankind to God, to be cleansed, forgiven, changed into his likeness revealed in Christ through his word and table, sent into the world in mission **with fire** to love the world to the God who is perfect love, perfect beauty, goodness and truth.

A final detail in this great Epiphany story: after worshipping the new King of Kings and giving him gifts that represented their finest treasures, these wise men went back to their own country by another route. According to Archbishop Fulton Sheen, of course they did. "No one ever comes to Christ and goes back the same way he came."

¹ Reggie Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 13.

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