

The Story of God in Worship

Dr. James R. Hart, President

The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

(A longer version of this article will appear in [Worship Leader](#) magazine.)

In a recent Presidential Address at IWS I stated, “According to the Church Fathers . . . 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 right worship, we become divinized; we grow in Christ-likeness, or godliness.”



This comment led to some lively conversation among students and faculty. Subsequently I spent some time with this idea, that God became human so humans could become God, and it led me to a few questions: What is the gospel, the story of God? Related to that, what is salvation? What are we saved from and saved to? And, what does worship have to do with this?

Missionary and theologian E. Stanley Jones stated that a thin or mild understanding of the Christian faith can inoculate us, making us immune from the radical claims of Christ, radical reliance on Christ, and the full meaning and significance God can bring to our lives through Christ.¹ When we water down the gospel we inoculate our congregations, making them immune to the radical nature of the good news of God in Jesus Christ. Churches sometimes neglect the radicality of Christianity, reducing it to therapeutic discourse or moralizing emphases or even a troubling narcissism or self-consciousness in worship that miss the essence of the gospel. A thin or mild gospel results in shallow worship, paltry spiritual formation, and ineffective mission. We need to recover the biblical understanding and the ancient church’s perspective on God’s story. This is “handed down to us in tradition [through] the canon of Scripture, the great ecumenical creeds, the liturgies, the catechumenate and the ethics of faith. By recovering this ancient narrative, we will be able to speak once again to the world about its own history, telling the truth about the Triune God who creates and who becomes involved in his own creation to restore it.”²

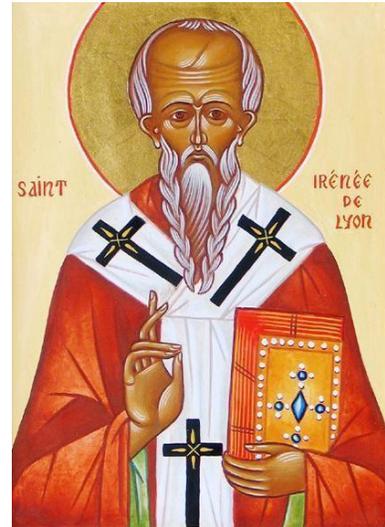
So, what is the gospel? Why is it important to worship? In his book [Ancient-Future Worship](#) Robert Webber defined the gospel generally as God’s story of reconciliation of the entire created order through the work of Jesus Christ, his only Son. Webber taught that the gospel is the entirety of the cosmic story of God, and the essential non-negotiable content of worship. His definition of the gospel, informed by his study of the Church fathers, related to the “divinely authorized canonical story of the Triune God. This story—Creation,

¹ I was introduced to this perspective by my colleague Mark Murray, who found the idea in the following book: Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, [Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony](#) (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 90.

² Robert E. Webber, [Who Gets to Narrate the World? Contending for the Christian Story in an Age of Rivals](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 117-118.

Incarnation, and Re-creation—was effected by Christ’s recapitulation of human history and summarized by the early Church in its Rules of Faith.”³ This perspective gives us an important context within which we can see a definition of the gospel emerge. That context is this idea of recapitulation, found in Eph. 1:9, 10. Here St. Paul wrote, “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite (Gr.: *anakephalaioo*, meaning “recapitulate”) all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”⁴

Recapitulation is a summarizing under one “head” as it were, or going back to the unified, original intent. Here in Ephesians Jesus recapitulates Adam. Adam was the first priest, who walked in intimate fellowship with God. However, Adam succumbed to temptation by arrogating to himself the prerogatives that are God’s alone, the determination of good and evil. This left the human family in chaos and sin. As the recapitulation of the first Adam, Jesus is the second and final Adam, the new high priest, who reverses the damage done by Adam’s rebellion and summons the human family, and the entirety of creation, **back to union with God**. The goal of our existence is union with God. Expanding on Paul’s perspective on recapitulation, St. Irenaeus famously wrote that Jesus “became what we are (human), that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself (divine).”



There are many who define the gospel as some version of the great Reformational/Evangelical axiom of justification (or salvation) by grace through faith. We are incapable of saving ourselves, so by faith we lay hold of God's grace revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and have forgiveness of sins. Is that wrong? No. But does it reveal the fullness of what Paul and the Gospel writers and Church fathers say about the good news, this union with God? Perhaps not.

The Church fathers saw the gospel as the proclamation of the victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. The earliest preaching of the gospel was, “You killed Jesus Christ, God raised him.” The first implication of this good news is this: Jesus is Lord, the victorious Lord, the *Christus Victor*.

The second implication of the resurrection is this: throughout his public life Jesus spoke and acted in the very person of God. The resurrection was the ultimate affirmation that Jesus is God incarnate. As God incarnate, Jesus fulfills the entirety of the Old Testament narrative. He was the very embodiment of the prophets, the very embodiment of the temple, the very embodiment of kingship. Law, prophets, covenant, temple, sacrifice, were all gathered up, transfigured and fulfilled in this risen Christ. He **is** the perfect union of God

³ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 180.

⁴ RSV, parentheses mine. All following passages are from the RSV.

and man. All of the Old Testament practices and institutions of law, prophets, covenant, temple, sacrifice were meant to bring about the unity of God and man. All of that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the very icon and epitome of the union of God and man. The good news of the resurrection proclaims that Jesus is the Lord of Lords and True God of true God. The divinity and lordship of Jesus follows directly from the resurrection of Jesus.

In light of this great affirmation of the victorious Christ we can see that **Jesus is the perfect coming together of divinity and humanity**. He is the fulfillment of the deepest longing of Israel, and in fact, the whole human race. In Jesus all of humanity, even in its most profound brokenness, has been taken up into the divine life, becoming divinized. This is why the church fathers universally believed that **God became human so humans could become God**. St. Athanasius stated even more clearly, “The Son of God became the Son of Man, so the sons of men could become the sons of God.” We don’t become the transcendent “I AM.” But we can become *like* him, transformed into his likeness revealed in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are drawn into that divine life and called to participate ever more fully in it. That’s divinization, or as the Eastern Church calls it, *theosis*. Salvation is this transfer from death into life. That is the gospel.

Coming back to the Reformational/Evangelical axiom, are we helpless? Yes. We cannot save ourselves. The church has always stood against all programs of human perfectibility. When we accept by faith that grace that’s been extended to us we are indeed saved **from** death and the power of sin and hell, but we are also saved **to** full participation in the divine life of God. That is the good news that we preach, proclaim, enact, sing, dance, embody and incarnate in worship. And, God’s story rightly proclaimed leads to “right worship” (or “orthodoxy”). Right worship is where union with God is re-experienced, enlivened, embodied, proclaimed, sung, enacted, etc., leading to robust mission that transforms the world into the fullness of God’s Kingdom.

So, the story of God, is this: The Son of God became the Son of Man, so the sons and daughters of men could become the sons and daughters of God. Proclaim that. Celebrate that. Sing that. Form worship around that. Embody that and incarnate that in mission. Resist a thin, mild substitute for the true power of the subversive good news of Jesus Christ, the true Son of God. That Gospel truly and eternally changes lives, conforming followers of Christ into Godliness, uniting creation back to the Creator, and ushering in the reign of God across the earth.

© 2016 by The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

Forming servant leaders in worship renewal

4001 Hendricks Avenue, Jacksonville, FL 32207

+1 (904) 264-2172