

Presidential Address

Worship Theology

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For the past few years, I have been using this time to do a brief review that explores the basics of worship theology, in order to help us be mindful of the “what” and “why” of worship. Let me begin with an explanation of what IWS is. IWS is a school of theology, specifically emphasizing the theology of worship.

What is Theology?

But what is theology? The etymology of the word would suggest that it is the study or reasoning or logic of *Theos*, the Greek word for God. Webster’s Dictionary defines it as “the study of religious faith, practice, and experience, especially the study of God and of God’s relation to the world.” Part of the Wikipedia definition is this: “Theology is the systematic study of the nature of the divine and, more broadly, of religious belief. . . . It occupies itself with the unique content of *analyzing the supernatural*.” The problem with both definitions, and frankly, with the study of theology in some sectors of the academy, is that these definitions place the student, or the analyzer, or the professor, above the subject being studied. This makes God into a scientific object that can be observed under an appropriate spiritual microscope. Furthermore, God would be subject to such analysis and, so to speak, tamed.



Church Father Augustine of Hippo once said, “Si comprehendus, non est Deus,” which means “If you understand, it is not God.” Liturgical theologian David Fagerberg gives a whole different perspective on theology. He defines theology as “The Logos revealing the Theos,” or, the Son revealing the Father. Ah, now this puts theology into a different category. Instead of *our* study or *our* analysis of God and *our* belief in Him, it advocates for us to encounter God’s self-revelation in Jesus the Christ and His call to all humankind to be changed into His likeness and sent on His mission. The Logos reveals the Theos. This perspective brings to mind Hans Urs von Balthasar’s advocacy of a kneeling theology in preference to a sitting theology. Students of IWS, do your theological studies in a constant attitude

of prayer. Become kneeling theologians instead of just sitting theologians. Ask the Logos to reveal the Theos.

Enacted and Embodied Theology

Worship theology has been understood as primary theology. It is theology enacted and embodied. It is theology that calls for full, conscious, and active participation. Worship theology sums up all theological disciplines, including biblical theology, philosophical theology, historical theology, moral theology, systematic and dogmatic theology, sacramental theology, liturgical theology, ascetical theology, aesthetical theology, practical theology, ecumenical theology, etc. Why? Because worship is primary—it applies, or actualizes, or animates all of these disciplines to the worship life and formation of all of God’s people.

I mentioned earlier that “when the Church is renewed with enlivened worship built on solid biblical, theological and historical foundations, Christians are formed with the compassionate heart of Jesus..., being poured out for the life of the world.” Of course, this is a reference to the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. In verse 51 Jesus proclaims, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Augustine’s commentary on this passage is as follows:

Our Lord pronounces Himself to be bread, not only in respect of that Divinity, which feeds all things, but also in respect of that human nature, which was assumed by the Word of God: And the bread, He says, that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. But when does flesh receive the bread which He calls His flesh? The faithful know and receive the Body of Christ if, they labor to be the body of Christ. And they become the body of Christ, if they study to live by the Spirit of Christ: for that which lives by the Spirit of Christ, is the body of Christ. . . . Whoso wishes to live, let him draw nigh, believe, be incorporated, that he may be quickened.

In worship we are formed into Christ’s Body, the ongoing incarnation of Christ, and poured out sacrificially for the life of the world, to draw the world, the entirety of creation, back to union with God.

I was speaking about these matters with a young woman recently. She commented that she honestly didn’t get that. While she was familiar with this biblical and theological truth, she often leaves Sunday worship with no real sense that she is

participating with the sacrifice of Christ, being poured out for the life of the world. Life looks roughly the same. There is an experiential and existential relentlessness to life, and even to worship. Maybe you sense that?

During the past few weeks, I have been reflecting on a common Pentecost antiphon based on Psalm 104, verse 30: “The Spirit of the Lord renews the face of the earth.” Okay, but how? I get up every morning and look around my yard. Nothing much is different. The grass is a bit higher, there may be a few more leaves on the ground, my cat is hungry AGAIN, so I have to feed her again. But do I honestly observe the Holy Spirit renewing the face of the earth?

There actually are signs of the Spirit’s renewal in the changes of seasons, the cycles of life, progressions in matters of human existence, and lives that are truly transformed by coming into union with God through Christ. But with those cycles of life and changes of seasons, there is also death. Along with the progressions in matters of human existence, there are similar progressions of a culture of death. Along with lives transformed by God, there are growing scandals among Christian leaders and growing polarization among all Christians on political issues.

Here is my point and my admonition to all of us, myself included. We have been given the immense privilege of participating with God in the Spirit’s renewal of the face of the earth. This is our universal call to mission. How? Through full, active, and conscious participation in worship, participation that helps us develop our spiritual eyes to see the saints and angels gathered in worship, eyes that visualize our sacrifices combining with the one sacrifice of Christ, eyes that comprehend the gathering of all nations and peoples of earth, and eyes that look forward to the Great Marriage Feast. We participate in the Spirit’s renewal of the face of the earth through our full, active, and conscious participation in worship, or through incarnational worship that fully involves a sacrificial offering of our minds, our bodies, our emotions, and our spiritual senses. As worship leaders, we are to lead the way in this kind of participation, and then we are to encourage our congregations, and other constituents to do the same. In doing so, we become participants with God in the Spirit’s renewal of the face of the earth, allowing ourselves to be formed into Christ so that we may then be sent out as the Body of Christ to the world.

Right Worship

God has called all of us and all of creation to right worship, orthodoxy—“right doxology”—“right glory.” God universally calls all humankind to true “worship,” right “adoration.” Right worship leads to the rightly ordered life, the rightly

ordered family, church, city, country, culture, even the rightly ordered cosmos. A *primary key to reading the entire biblical narrative is this: God is calling his creation to right worship (over and over again)*. God ultimately wants his people to worship him aright, not because he needs our praise, but because in that great act we become rightly aligned unto God through Jesus Christ, the primary worshipper. The first purpose of worship is for all humankind to enter fully into union with God.

In worship we have the great privilege of telling the world its true story and bringing it to the right worship of the only God who is ultimately true, good, and beautiful. Here is the second great purpose of worship--God wants right worship so we can be rightly ordered and sent on mission to tell the world its true story. This is why the focus on true worship is at the very core of the Christian faith, and why the study of worship is of supreme importance! God chooses and shapes a people with his heart and mind to praise him aright, to reverse the process of dis-integration, to re-integrate, to re-order our lives around Christ, and to go out on mission to participate in the reconciliation of creation. This is true worship.

This perspective is summed up in the succinct definition of worship compiled by IWS professor Greg Wilde: Worship is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the icon of the invisible God, the epitome of what it means to be fully human made fully alive by the Divine. Jesus is the perfect and precise image of the marriage of humanity and divinity, beckoning us all to that same life-giving marriage, and then sending us likewise to summon the entire world back to the bridegroom in anticipation of the Great Marriage Feast of the Lamb.

You all know the story of the healing of Jairus' daughter. On the way to Jairus' home, a woman in the crowd with the issue of blood touched Jesus' cloak, and she was healed. To paraphrase David Fagerberg on this story, “[Worship] is the cloak Jesus leaves behind for us to touch. It is our contact with Jesus now that he is risen and ascended. [Worship] is our taction with the Lamb of God. . . . Sin is bleeding to death, and worship heals us by stopping what slowly drains us of life.”

Welcome to this supremely important life-giving task—the kneeling theological study and practice of Christian worship in which we engage for one purpose only—for the life of the world.