

# Presidential Address Worship As Sacrifice

Dr. James R. Hart, President

The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

June 21, 2023

I would like to address the somewhat controversial topic of worship as sacrifice. Hebrews 13:15-16 states, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge [confess] his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (RSVCE, emphasis mine.)

Early in my career in worship leadership, I worked as an orchestra director in a large nondenominational charismatic congregation. We had a specific way of understanding this passage. My good friend Jim Gilbert used to say, “God gave us dignity so that we have something to sacrifice back to him in worship.” He wasn’t referring to our fundamental human dignity based on being created in the image of God, but rather the false kind of dignity that we put on to appear more sophisticated than we are. One of ways we would



overcome our false dignity and pride is through intentional physical expressions of worship, such as kneeling, bowing, lying prostrate, lifting our hands, and dancing. Yes, dancing. Do you know that dancing is one of the most common physical expressions of worship in scripture, possibly second only to singing? Now, in my church we weren’t swing dancing or doing the cha-cha or the twist or the electric slide. Since this church was in Tulsa, we perfected what was called the Tulsa two-step. Later in my career, when I went to festivals with our youth choir, the youth director and I learned how to mosh in the youth worship gatherings.

We did a form of dancing here at IWS this past January in chapel led and inspired by our own Dr. Pedrito Maynard-Reid. It was glorious! And it wasn’t the first time. We have had different kinds of dancing in chapel numerous times over the 24 years of IWS’ existence. Is it biblical? Absolutely! Is it sacrificial, out of our comfort zones for some, and perhaps a bit undignified? For many, yes. Perhaps that makes dancing before the Lord even more of a sacrificial act. It certainly did for King David as he danced with all his might before the Ark of the Covenant and then had to endure the sarcasm of his wife Michal, “How the king of Israel honored himself today...” His famous response? “I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes” (2 Sam 6:20, 22).

Why do we sing, dance, raise our hands, bow, lie prostrate, cross ourselves, kneel, etc.? Why do we sacrifice our false dignity? What about it is truly efficacious?

I was having lunch one day with a young man who sang in a college choir that IWS hosted on a spring break tour. He was interested in coming to IWS, but he wanted to let me know that he was lead singer in a screamo band. He asked, “Is there a place in convergence worship for screamo?”

My short answer was yes. After we chatted about the screamo culture, he said to me, “Do you know why we scream? It’s because we love Jesus so much.” Good answer! Our physical expressions of worship are acts of devotion to the Lord, sacrificial of our false dignity, humbling our own reticence to show such devotion. “Clap your hands all you people; shout to God with a voice of triumph!” (Ps 47:1).

Let’s go a bit deeper than the sacrifice of physical dignity in dance (or screamo), to the fuller sacrifice of ourselves. What *is* sacrifice? Theologian Kevin Irwin states that, “In a religious context it is clear that ‘sacrifice’ is a very significant and often highly charged term. Literally, ‘sacrifice’ comes from combining two Latin words meaning ‘to make holy’ (*sacrum facere*). Even this brief, literal definition invites us to see in the term ‘sacrifice’ a key to our appropriating the very holiness of God.”<sup>1</sup>

As worshippers and worship leaders, we must actively, consciously, and fully intensify our sacrificial participation in the life of the Triune God in numerous ways—through prayer, evangelization, care for the poor, corporal and spiritual acts of mercy, to name just a few. But the most intense way to participate sacrificially in the life of the Triune God is in worship centered around Word and Table. As you actively and consciously participate in Word and Table, you become a self-sacrifice—not passively, but actively. By the Holy Spirit and in the womb of the Mystical Body of Christ, you become Christ-like, you become Christ’s body to the world, you become Christ to the world, “Christifying” the cosmos. Theologian David Fagerberg writes, “The Body of Christ does not assemble to do a cultic Church, but it assembles to do the world, redeemed. The objective is for the hearer to become godly in order to draw the world back to its source.”<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the worship of the Church is understood as our sacrificial participation in the worship of heaven revealed in the books of Hebrews and Revelation. This liturgy is led by Jesus himself. It is the heavenly banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb slain for eternity.

This is a truth worth repeating: Jesus is the coming together of divinity and humanity. He is the fulfillment of the deepest longing of the whole human race. God even set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11) and a craving that can only be filled by the infinite and immutable God himself through his incarnate Son, Jesus the Christ. In Jesus, all of humanity, even in its most profound brokenness, has been taken up into the divine life. This is why the church fathers universally believed that God became human so humans could become God. I like the way St. Athanasius stated it, “The Son of God became the Son of Man, so the sons and daughters of men could become the sons and daughters of God” (*On the Incarnation*). We don’t become the *ipsum esse subsistens*, the subsistent act of “to be” itself, as St. Thomas Aquinas referred to God (*Summa Theologica*). But we can become like him, transformed into his likeness revealed in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We are drawn into the divine life and called to participate ever more fully in that life. That’s divinization, or as the Eastern Church calls it, *theosis*. That’s what it means to be saved: saved

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin W. Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist*, (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 217-218.

<sup>2</sup> David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago/Mundelein, IL: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 152

from sin, death, and hell, and saved to full participation in the divine life of God. This process of divinization is the Good News that we preach, proclaim, enact, sing, dance, embody, and incarnate in our sacrificial worship—worship that makes us holy, set apart for God and his purposes.

With this definition of sacrifice in mind, let's look at the very important feast that we celebrated on May 18: the Feast of the Ascension of Christ. What is the significance of the Ascension of Christ? (There is a multiplicity of significances.) Fundamentally, Jesus ascended to where? Outer space? Up, up and away? Somewhere out there? No. He ascended to a different realm, the eternal realm, a realm which allows him to be infinitely more immanent to us (through the Holy Spirit) than he ever could be in this limited existence of time and space.

What does the ascended Christ do? According to Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25, he intercedes for us and for all people. He is praying for us right now, at this very moment, outside of our time limitations. But more than that, he is continually offering himself as the Paschal Lamb in that one and only great sacrifice that now is offered eternally outside of the constraints of time and space.

Throughout the book of Revelation, the ascended Christ is primarily referred to as the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the earth, the paschal victim for all time. He is God taking on flesh as a living sacrifice for us and for the world, and calling us to sacrifice our own selves, following his infinitely supreme model of eternal sacrifice for the life of the world. He has elevated all humanity into the eternal realm, enabling divinization which progresses toward union with God. Remember, this is how St. Paul defines salvation—union with God “in Christ” (mentioned 216 times in the Pauline letters). Theologian John Murray wrote that union with Christ is “the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”<sup>3</sup> In Colossians 1:27 Paul states, “To them (the saints) God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Union with God through Christ is real, it is mystical, and it is eschatological.

The Lamb of God became a living sacrifice to *sacrum facere*, to “make holy” the created order, to restore all things, especially us, back to the Creator. Then, according to Romans 12:1, 2, he calls us to become “living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God,” and that IS our spiritual worship. In other words, as living sacrifices, we also in turn participate as agents in his mission to *sacrum facere*, make holy, all creation and all humankind.

Since everything in this world is created by God—including time and space—everything finds its end, or its fullest meaning, in union with God. This is especially true for humankind, we who are created in the *imago Dei*, or as St. Augustine (*De Trinitate*) named it, the *imago trinitatis*, the fully integrative image of the Triune God. What is the difference between humans made in the *imago trinitatis* and the rest of creation? We alone have the dignity and right to say “no” to God. And we do that every day, even multiple times a day. Worship centered around Word and Table functions primarily to turn our no's into yes's. That is why IWS exists—to show the world how to turn their no's to God into a giant yes, a giant sacrificial yes—every week, every day, every

---

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 161.

hour, and every minute, through transforming worship that beckons us to full, conscious, and active participation in Christ and submission to the God Who is love without limit or measure. Then, we go in sacrificial love to the world as agents of this loving God who makes all things holy in his time to his glory.

Pray for eyes to see the Paschal Lamb as an eternal offering every time you worship, especially at Word and Table. Then sacrifice your sins, your agendas, your preconceptions, your plans, and your life to the Lordship of that ascended Paschal Lamb, allowing His One sacrifice for all time to *sacrum facere*, to make you holy, for mission, for the sake of God's kingdom.

© 2023 James Hart, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies