

## The Dangerous Act of Worship

### Revelation 4, 5

Discipleship Essentials - Part One: Growing Up in Christ

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

It has come to my attention several times in the last few days, including a show of moments on network television, that our fountain of the cross has attracted much attention. If you have not seen it, you will note the overwhelming flow of ice pouring out. It has been commented to me, it is representative of that infamous Presbyterian statement that we are the “frozen chosen.” Now I beg to differ with that. I believe the ice is calling high attention to the centrality of the cross, which is the nature of the fountain, and that is the center of our worship. At the center of worship is the Lamb who was slain, to receive honor and glory and wisdom and might and power. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are worthy to open now this scroll of Scripture, for you were the one who laid down your life for all nations and all peoples, from the past to the future. And you have made us to be a kingdom, and priests, by your word, to serve our God. Now speak to us in that word. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We gather to worship every Sunday; and worship calls disciples—people who have decided to follow Jesus—to be followers out into the world to do the mission and service of Jesus Christ. Worship is the centerpiece, the center place, for all people who gather to identify who God in Jesus Christ. And that drives us out into the world from this center. Worship is about knowing who God really is, not who we want God to be from our own image. Greg Ogden, in his book *Discipleship Essentials*, quotes an excerpt from God, Man, and Archie Bunker, by Spencer Marsh. It has Archie Bunker talking with his black neighbor, George Jefferson, and the interchange goes like this: Archie says, “Every picture I’ve ever seen of God, he was white.” George Jefferson responds, “Maybe you were looking at the negatives.”

We tend to worship a God who is like us, rather than the way worship is meant to be: to be drawn into worshipping a God who asks us to become like him. Worship is at the center of this passage from Revelation. Eugene Peterson calls this, in *Reversed Thunder*, his commentary on Revelation, the last word on worship. It is the great word on worship. The trumpet call from heaven calls all nations, all peoples—from past and present, all people today—to worship of the God who is on the throne. It is the worship of the Creator, in Revelation 4, and the worship of the Lamb, the Savior, in Revelation chapter 5. The full nature of God is unfolded at the center of worship. It is important that we see that worship is about recognition of the God who really is, who reveals himself to us in Scripture and in Jesus Christ.

William Wilberforce—the youngest minister of Parliament at the age of 21—who had been troubled in spirit for a few months, even to the point where he was experiencing a dark night of the soul, said, as he took a walk on Easter morning, “amidst the general chorus of all nature seemed such a morning to be swelling the song of praise and thanksgiving.” He was overwhelmed, in his personal worship, with the reality of God. In that experience and conversion, Wilberforce sensed a powerful call to put an end to slavery once and for all. And it took him his entire life to do so.

The dangerous act of worship will drive us to dangerous acts of discipleship. Worship is not just about showing up on Sunday morning and having a good time in the presence of God. It is about hearing from God and being driven into the world to accomplish things that reflect the kingdom of God on earth. Wilberforce said that the supremacy of God’s glory is in all things; he called this the grand governing maxim of all life. And he believed that he was called not only to abolish slavery, but to reform the moral structure of England; and in so doing, reform the moral structure of the entire kingdom of England throughout the world.

Is this a grandiose expectation? No. We see in proof that one human being who encounters God is able, in reality, to make significant impact upon the world in the community of followers of Jesus Christ. The dangerous act of worship. We often miss the real dangers implied. It is not so much the danger that is talked about so often in the church today as the battle between contemporary and traditional worship. Almost every church I know in the United States is struggling over this: shall we do contemporary or traditional or some combination thereof? It misses the point. Danger is not so much what style of worship we do, but whether or not we encounter God in the midst of our worship.

As Mark Labberton says in his book, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, Danger No. 1 is that we don’t encounter God—because the God we want, we want to control. Danger No. 2 is: we lie to God. And Danger No. 3 is: we lie about God in our worship. We particularly lie about God in our sense that we want God to be the kind of God who does our thing, rather than encountering a God who beckons us to do God’s thing. Worship gathers us together around the center, who is Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of the throne of God. The Scripture we have here pictures that gathering as some wild illustrations of four creatures with all eyes and wings. As Eugene Peterson says in *Reversed Thunder*, this may be a reflection in the creatures: all creatures of our God and king, lift up your voice and sing: the noblest in the lion; the strongest in the ox; the swiftest in the eagle; and the wisest in the human face. Full of eyes, alert, and with wings able to soar in the presence of God; all creation worships at the throne.

Worship shines. We are a church privileged to have these magnificent stained-glass windows, multicolored rainbow effects. And it is, in fact, a re-enactment of this passage from Revelation 4 and 5. Surrounding the throne is the rainbow of color; the light emanating out from the cross of Jesus Christ. The jewels that reflect God’s full nature and color are like carnelian, emerald, and jasper: multicolored, full-color presence—that is the nature of God in the presence of worship. Emanating out from that rainbow are flashes of lightning and flaming torches. In other words, when we experience that transcendence of God’s presence in the midst, we will be driven out as flames into the world, wherever we are sent. Light to bring to dark places, even as John, the Beloved, was in the midst

of prison when he wrote this great, great gospel of Revelation.

Worship bathes. Around the rainbow and the emanating light is a glassy sea. Before the throne, and before people can get to the throne, they must walk through the glassy sea (probably an image of baptism.) In order to become a person who can even worship God, one must fully acknowledge one's sinfulness and be cleansed and forgiven, in order to really worship God in fullness. It is that cleansing and forgiveness, that readiness by going through the glassy sea... the still waters...that Jesus calls us, to become forgiven, and to be a part of the elders, the creatures, and the saints, who worship around the throne.

It is true that we are a church around the cross; but we are thawed out because of the heat of God at the center of our presence. If you leave here cold, you have missed the point. Worship at its heart reveals not just the God who created all things, but more importantly, the God who redeems all things: the God who takes things that are broken, and repairs and transforms them into things that are good. The one who is God, who does that, is the Lamb. The Lamb stands with the Father at the throne. The Lamb is the only one who's qualified to take the scroll, which is probably a reference to the historic scriptures and history of God's presence in the world. The Lamb is the only one who can take this book and interpret it.

I received a question just last week about how do you understand the Old Testament and a God who will kill and ask for vengeance, in light of who Jesus is? How do you make sense of an Old Testament God and a New Testament Jesus? Were the people out-of-touch? No. In our Reformed tradition we understand, just like this passage acknowledges, that Jesus, the one who was slain from the foundation of the earth, is the only one who is worthy to open the book. And so we hear the proclamation in every part of this book, in every aspect of the scroll, through the interpretation of Jesus. For Jesus is the full demonstration of God. If you want to know what the Old Testament means, look at Jesus. If you want to know what the New Testament means, look at Jesus. If you want to understand why there is such complexity, disinterest, disengagement, and disagreement around God, look at Jesus. For Jesus is the only one who could bring order to that chaos. The Lamb only is worthy to unlock the scroll.

Worship sings. This passage is full of five great hymns: two that are addressed to God Creator; two addressed to the Lamb on the cross; and one addressed to both the Creator and the Lamb together. It is an acknowledgment that God has been seen fully through the Lamb, Jesus. The Lamb itself has been able to make all people who come to the throne a kingdom of priests, saints who pray, elders who worship, and creatures who say "Amen." We worship through our hymns, just like John is worshipping through the great hymns that he knew at his time. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

Honor is repeated three times in these hymns. That word, honor, has a very interesting nuance to it from history. It is the Greek word *time*, which is our contemporary word "time." Worthy is the Lamb that is valuable enough to receive our time. Everything that we value in this culture and creation pivots around time. Time is money. Worthy to receive the dignity because he paid the high price. He paid the time for us. He took the bullet for us. He laid down his life for us. He is worthy of our attention.

Worship calls and worship sends. As you've heard the trumpet call this morning, we are called, when we go out these doors, to go out in the name of the God we worship. The throne creates other thrones; it's not heretical to say that elders will rule on thrones. Those thrones are in obedience to the throne of God. But the people of God—the saints of God—become the priests of God who will reign on earth forever. Disciples are called to follow and act; to become prophets and apostles; to take up the pattern of Jesus, who reigns on the throne.

Mark Labberton finishes his dangerous acts of discipleship in his book by saying that two more real dangers are at stake here in worship. One has to do with the possibility that we'll walk out of here and we won't change. The second is that we'll walk out of here, and we won't change the world. Worship moves us to leadership—acts of justice, equity, and peace in this world: intervention for the poor, the homeless, and those who do not know God; the abused, the refugee, and the alien. We cling to our safety too often, rather than venturing into the world to create safety for other people. We often talk about sanctuary being this place. One of our responsibilities, if we're going to live into worship, is to create safe places and sanctuary for other people out in the world.

William Wilberforce, who is being recognized in a wonderfully-developed movie called *Amazing Grace*, after 20 years of hard work, finally persuaded Parliament in 1807 to abolish the slave trade. On February 23, 2007, this film will be unleashed to call attention to a man who, before Abraham Lincoln, was the great emancipator of slaves. Wilberforce believed he was called not only to change people's moral behavior, but to change their cultural action, public responsibility, and morality; to get rid of slavery and change how people behaved. Discipleship is the result of mission. Worship calls us out into discipleship and mission. Wilberforce met with John Newton, the great slave trader who had become an Anglican clergyman, who wrote "Amazing Grace." And in that event, Newton said, after his experience of God in worship, and Wilberforce's experience of God in worship, "You are called for such a time as this. Go and rid this world of slavery."

We see in our bulletin that Gary Haugen, the president of International Justice Mission, is going to be given one of our leadership awards from the National Center for Leadership. Gary Haugen also received the Wilberforce Award not too many weeks past, for freeing the current slaves in a world of children, families, and women—from exploitation and human slavery that goes on almost in every other nation, and this nation of the world, still. Worship is dangerous. It leads us to take action.

Billy Graham, at the age of 87, was probably at his last event in New Orleans on December 5, 2006. Rather than just leave the people in an act of worship, he did an amazing thing at the end of that service. He said, "From the very first time I stepped into this city of New Orleans, I believed there was a mountain to conquer. Let us go together and do that." He proceeded to lead the 16,000 people present out from the arena at the center of the city, to Bourbon Street. And to have that mass of people sing "Amazing Grace" in the center of one of the places of notorious life, he enacted the dangerous act of worship. Let us do the same.

Let us pray. Lord, Jesus the Christ, the Lamb slain, you are worthy to receive all honor. You are worthy to receive the sacrifice of our

lives as you call us out of this place of worship into the world to accomplish the kingdom of God, and to reign forever. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.