

The Drama of Worship (Chapter 4)

Drama...worship...those are not two words that we put together. Drama comes from the Greek word “dramatos” meaning “action” or “doing.” We associate drama with action, excitement, anticipation, tension...are those words in our minds when we think about worship?

There is an overall message about worship in Scripture that is usually missed: Worship is drama.

A young boy attended a church in New England with his family. He was right at the age when he was beginning to see things around him that had been there all the time but had previously gone unnoticed. This particular morning he stopped and looked at a plaque with a long list of names in the narthex...a plaque he hadn't noticed. He asked his Dad what the plaque and the names were. “Those are a list of men and women from this church that died in the service.” The boy asked his father as they turned and left, “Did they die in the 8:30 or 11:00 service?” We laugh because that is a popular notion about worship. Now let me ask you a question. In your mind as you imagined the point of that story. What happened to those people? Did they die of boredom...were they bored to death, or did they die in a drama filled with risk and danger? We laughed because we knew they died of boredom.

Worship is a drama involving our participation.

*Then Solomon assembled **the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel**, in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. 2 Chronicles 5:2*

*Then the king turned around and blessed **all the assembly of Israel**, while **all the assembly of Israel** stood. 2 Chronicles 6:3*

In this picture of the ancient worship of Israel the entire assembly of people participated in this worship...this may seem elementary to many of us but it is fundamental to our understanding of worship. When God reveals Himself...when the people of God come into God's presence there are no observers.

There is a scene in Revelation for which I have a great affection.

“And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...’” Revelation 5:7-9

When Jesus stepped forth and took the deed of ownership to all of history the worship began with the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. But then what happened?

“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Revelation 5:11-12)

They were joined by millions of angels. But there was more.

“And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’” (Revelation 5:13)

All of heaven and earth joined in this cacophony of worship.

One cannot be in His presence...see His glory, see His sovereignty, see His majesty, see His grace, see His love, see His power...one cannot see this and be an observer...He must be a worshipper. I cannot not worship. We don't go to the services in our church to watch others worship. We go there as worshippers ourselves.

We live in an “audience culture.” We sit and watch and listen to others on television. We go to football games to watch others play. We go to the

symphony to watch and listen as others produce music. However, when the congregation becomes an audience, we have missed it.

I really think that is how most folks consciously or subconsciously approach worship. Too often we come and watch and listen what the ministers, choir, musicians, and ushers do.

The Greek word used most often for worship in the New Testament is the word “proskuneo.” “pros” meaning “toward” and “kuneo” meaning “to kiss”... “to kiss toward.” Do you remember your first kiss? I remember the first time I kissed my wife, Janet. I have never enjoyed watching someone else kiss as much as I have enjoyed kissing her. In worship the God who demonstrated His passion for us in the sacrifice of His own Son meets with the people who love and adore Him. Can such a meeting be passionless? I read this technical definition of a kiss: “A kiss is the juxtaposition of two orbicular ors muscles in the state of contraction.” That may be an accurate definition of a kiss, but whoever wrote it did not know anything about a real kiss. Theologians have spent lifetimes developing precise definitions of worship...but the definition no matter how technically accurate cannot capture true worship unless that definition is filled with the drama and passion of worship. Worship is a drama involving our participation

True worship is a spiritual drama. The portrait of the worship of Israel painted in 2 Chronicles 5 demonstrates the spiritual nature of their worship.

“...so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.” (2Chronicles 5:14”

The spiritual presence of God (the cloud) permeated the Temple and dominated their actions. The drama there emanated from the Spirit of God.

Let’s fast-forward to another scene of worship.

“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.” (Acts 2:1-6)

As the Spirit of God fell on them what did they see...what did they hear? They heard a “sound like a mighty rushing wind” July 22, 2003 Janet was up early preparing her lesson for our Vacation Bible School. I was still in bed somewhere in that nether land between sleep and consciousness. About 6:50 I heard a single lightning bolt and thunder and thought I would remain in bed a few minutes and enjoy the rain. Moments later I heard Janet’s concerned voice, “John, I think you better get up.” It was said in a tone that told me she thought we might be in trouble. I looked out the window. Trees...our huge oak was being blown so hard that the upper part of the tree was parallel to the ground and the trunk was moving like it was a sapling. I had always heard that a tornado would sound like a train. The wind was so violent that it sounded like a train that was running inches from our outside wall. We immediately went to the security of our shower stall. We stood in confines of that small space for ten minutes while the storm roared. When we came out...there was no power in the house. We would be without power for two weeks. Most of the city of Memphis was without power...300,000 houses and businesses. What had happened? We had experienced what I had never seen...100 mph straight-line winds...sustained winds for 10 to 15 minutes.

The “freight train” wind...the loud deafening roar Janet and I heard that morning, that’s what the disciples heard in the room where they were on the day of Pentecost.

What did those disciples see? “And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.” There was fire around them. Have you ever seen tongues of fire? That is dramatic...a drama that was spiritual in nature. The glory of the Lord was once more filling the temple.

In his message how did Peter describe what the congregation was witnessing?

“But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’” (Acts 2:16-21)

Peter quoted the prophet, Joel, who centuries before foretold what would happen at Pentecost. Joel used graphic, figurative, apocalyptic language that was meant to communicate the serious spiritual drama of these events.

Worship is a spiritual drama that involves the eternal themes of a tragic fall, sin, guilt, confession, death, justice, redemption, forgiveness, grace, and love. We find all of these themes in Peter’s sermon in Acts 2.

When we baptize our children we participate in a dramatic action 4000 years old...as we recognize God’s ownership, covenant, and redemption.

When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we participate in a dramatic action that is 2000 years old. We remember Jesus in a room with His disciples breaking bread and saying...this is My body given for you...all of you eat of it. We remember Jesus giving them a cup of wine and saying, “This is my blood shed for your sins...all of you drink of it.”

Folks, when we see the pageantry of the worship designed by God in the Old Testament...when we see the pageantry of worship in Revelation...we should wonder at our lack of pageantry...our lack of a sense of drama. Every week in the drama of worship we deal with these gigantic themes in our sanctuaries.

In the awful wake of hurricane Katrina a friend, trying to bring aid and comfort to that area, called me. After the storm he had immediately left his home in Memphis carrying emergency supplies to the coast. When he called he was standing with a couple whose home had been lost in the catastrophic destruction. Her brother lived in Lexington, Kentucky where I was a minister. She had not been able to reach him to tell him that she and her husband were alive. Jean had worked for 30 minutes to get a call through on his cell to me. I called her brother and gave him the news that his sister and her husband were alive. There is joy in such news...there is elation and laughter...lost but found...redeemed from disaster...such is the news to which we respond every Lord's day...every worship.