

Manuscript of the June 29, 2008 Sermon – Jeffrey E. Bryan The Great Ends of the Church Series

3. The maintenance of divine worship – Part 1

⁶Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.

¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

¹¹Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹²In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,

for ever and ever!" ¹⁴The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Our sermon topics this summer are being guided by the historic, quote-unquote “great ends” of the church. The term “great ends” is just old-timey language for “what being the church is all about.” This is who we are and this is what we do. You will see all six great ends listed in your bulletin. Today we are looking at #3: the maintenance of Divine Worship. Worship is the beginning and end of everything we do as a church. It is such a wide-ranging topic, such an important topic, I am 100% confident we cannot cover everything. So we will do our best in just 2 Sundays: today and next week.

As you know, the Worship Commission of this church has been having an honest, open-ended conversation about our fall 3-service worship schedule. Believe it or not, this has been an exciting and energizing experience. It is so interesting for me to receive your notes and emails and to hear your comments. I especially enjoy how different groups approach the subject of worship. For example, I can imagine the Finance Commission looking at the 3-service schedule and wondering how going to 1 service or 2 services or 5 services would influence pledging. That is the money point of view, and it’s exactly what you want in a Finance Commission. I can imagine the Christian Education folks taking the education view, faithfully asking, “What is the best way for us to maximize discipleship for children, and for that matter, discipleship for every generation.” This one is my favorite: some folks simply frame the question in terms of preference and convenience. “We should do things this way or that, at this time or that, because that’s the way I like it”: equally valid, equally logical, all equally wonderful ways of approaching the subject of worship.

My job as pastor in this whole process, and I want to be clear about this, my job is not to predict the future, find the answer, or please everybody (which everyone knows, it is impossible to please everybody). My job is to interpret what we do in terms of theology. Obviously, what I find most energizing is the opportunity our Worship Commission has to look at worship from a theological point of view. How will our decisions be guided by faith in God? What do we believe about worship? And, this is essential: what do the scriptures say about worship? What exactly is worship? That’s a big question. I want to point out 2 things worship is not, and 1 thing, among many, that worship is.

First, worship is not music. There is a trend in American Christianity these days to divide the Sunday morning hour into “the worship” and “the teaching.” I think people do this because music is such a good thing, and most sermons have a tendency to be really bad. Music has the potential to lift our spirits in an emotional way. It just feels like worship when we are caught up in music. I love church music, all of it. I especially love it when we all sing together, loud. However, worship is not just music. In the scripture we used for our Call to Worship, Psalm 95, you may have noticed: we are encouraged to sing, and bow down, and kneel. Worship is not just music, music is something we do in worship among other things, like pray, confess, preach, and read scripture. Just an example: reading scripture is an incredibly important part of worship. Did you know Jewish folks, over the course of 12 months every year, read the entire Old Testament out loud in worship, in Hebrew?

Honestly though, when it comes to music, and we all know this, the real issue is style. For the last 40 years, maybe even for the last 4,000 years, people of faith have been arguing over what kind of music to have in worship. Scholars call this the Worship Wars. Different parts of the country play it out in different ways, but if you go to just about any house of worship in America you will see the battleground of the Worship Wars. The big, expensive pipe organ and the little, red, beat-up drum set just sit there growling at each other.

Personally, I really could not care less about music style. I do not care about, hymnals, screens and projectors, guitars, organs, drum sets, whatever. That is my official stance. I don't care. **JOKE.** But I do think I understand where people are coming from when we have Worship Wars over music style. Folks come to church to feel comforted. We come here to be reminded that God is real, that God loves us, and everything's going to be okay. Familiar music is a wonderful place to find comfort. That just makes sense. And on the other hand, some folks come to church convinced that being comforted is different than being comfortable. The scriptures tell us to make joyful noise, to sing a new song. People all over the world are composing new, creative, faithful worship songs everyday. These people say, “Big deal - we have to go through the effort of learning new songs. It is important” they say “for our worship to be current with the reality we live in.” That makes sense, too, and so the arguments circle

around and around and the big screen and the worship bulletin growl at each other.

I want to brag on you, First Presbyterian Church. I have seen other congregations all but decapitate each other in the Worship Wars. Yet, everyone I talk to in this church, literally, has a fantastic attitude. It's always, "Hey, I like "abc" kind of music, but you know, other folks like "xyz", so we all get a chance to sing what we like eventually. It's all good." I am so proud of you, church, please keep up the good attitudes.

One more thing about music style: the trick is to stop thinking about style and personal preference and pleasing everybody, and start thinking about what it is exactly we're doing in this worship hour. How can we worship the best way possible? How can we worship in a way that pleases God?

That brings me to the next thing worship is not: worship is not about me. The culture we live in, and I'm sure you know this already, our culture is very self-centered. Everything is all about me: my self-fulfillment, my rights, my resume, my transcripts, my retirement, what's in it for me, me, me? I believe this is one of those times when, as citizens of Heaven first and foremost, we the church oppose popular culture. Worship is not about me, me, me.

Now don't get me wrong. We all need spiritual disciplines and devotions, even all-by-yourself worship. I know I could use more and more of that. And, I know how important it is to come to church and really feel like I've worshipped. It stinks to feel like you're getting nothing out of worship, like you're not getting that feeling. It is just that our culture of self-centeredness has a habit of creeping in and making the worship of God about me, my experience, my likes and dislikes. Notice how, when it comes to worship, the Bible is all about the "us". Take the Lord's Prayer for example. It is fantastic to pray the Lord's Prayer by yourself. Please do, everyday. But notice it's all "we" and "us" and "our." Worship is something we do together. In that Revelation passage, the afterlife is about every creature in heaven and on earth joining together to worship Jesus Christ. Worship is not about me. It is something we do together.

That brings us to the last thing. What is worship? Now there are a billion ways of looking at this thing, and I'm only giving one. Worship is a conversation with the very real, very present Lord. Martin Luther, the great 16th Century reformer said this, "nothing else [needs to] be done in

[worship] but that our dear Lord Himself talk to us through his Holy Word, and that we in turn, talk to him in prayer and song of praise.” John Calvin, the great theologian and founder of the Presbyterian movement, said this, “What is the [purpose] of the preaching of the word, the sacraments, the holy assemblies, and the whole external government of the church, but that we may be united to God?” The Sunday morning worship hour is a back and forth conversation with the God who is with us. We try to always use scripture for the call to worship, because God starts it off. God calls us to worship. We sing hymns of praise. God calls us to confess, we confess, God assures us of his love, we sing thank you. We pray to God, give God our offerings, God speaks to us in scripture and in the proclamation of the Word. God calls us to worship and at the end God sends us out with a blessing and benediction.

Church, worship is not about style. It’s not about me and my preferences. It’s about God. Worship is about coming together in the presence of the Lord, being united in the Spirit, and communicating. The message we have for the Lord is the same message we will sing in heaven before the throne, the same message written in scripture: blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! God’s great message to us is himself, Jesus Christ, who lived and died and lives again for us and our salvation. God’s message is, I love you and I will never leave you no matter what.