



## WHAT UNITES US IN WORSHIP

Galatians 2:11-21

September 6, 2009

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

### Worship Wars – First and Twenty-First Century (Gal. 2:11-14)

It is great to be all together this morning. We also want to thank you for making the effort to be a part of this service; we recognize that this is logistically more complicated than meeting at 931 Lake Street.

We wanted to gather as a single congregation for a single service for a singularly important purpose. To discuss together what unites us in worship. This is a critical topic for the church because something critical is going on all around us: worship wars!

In her book on church worship, Marva Dawn expresses what I think many of us feel. She writes: “I am worried about the Church. The ‘worship wars’ that rage in so many congregations are preventing us from truly being the Church.” And so she asks: “Can we find some way to prevent discussions about worship styles from becoming fierce and bitter battles waged between two entrenched camps?”<sup>1</sup>

Worship wars—to juxtapose worship of the God of Peace and War, Strife, Division, Suffering, Loss! To my knowledge this is the only area in the evangelical church where we feel compelled to use the metaphor of war to describe the current state of affairs. We don’t, for example, talk about ‘discipleship wars’ or ‘men’s ministry wars’ or ‘missions wars’ or ‘prayer wars’ or even ‘preaching wars’. Yet we evangelical Christians do talk about worship wars. Only in corporate worship, where music and liturgy is a part, do we use this expression that captures the importance of the issues at stake and sense of loss that we might incur depending upon the outcome of the war!

Churches have sought in various ways to bring peace to the worship wars. One approach has been to adopt a *policy of isolationism*: design a church around a single demographic of the population—in isolation from other demographics—and you will in all likelihood not have a worship war. Another approach has been the *concessions and common ground* approach: the church identifies a musical common ground and then invites, asks, pleads with everyone to make concessions to meet there in the middle, and leave the entire congregation unhappy in the process. A third approach is what you might call the *divide and conquer* strategy: subdivide the church into as many worship services as is necessary to accommodate the various stylistic preferences, and hope that this conquers any disputes or disagreements.

Now despite these all being well-intended approaches, displaying some degree of success, they are often only short-term solutions, addressing superficial issues and not forging a unity that is ours because of the gospel. That’s the critical thing. They’re more like calling for a cease fire than establishing a real sense of unity and thus peace in the midst of the worship wars.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Eerdmans, 1995), p. 3.

Which raises the question: Is there a way to bring deep, lasting peace to the worship wars? Is there a way for us as a church to attain unity, to come together as a single, multi-ethnic, multi-generational congregation in worship? Is there a way to identify that which could possibly unite us in a deep and lasting ways in worship? And if so, what is it?

Well, the first step to addressing this is to remember that worship wars have been going on for a long, long time, even from the beginning. In fact, the first multi-ethnic church, the first church comprised of both Jews and non-Jews, or Gentiles, the first church to be called “Christian” (see Acts 11)—the church in Syrian Antioch—had the first worship wars. We read about it in today’s passage of Scripture, Galatians 2:11-14.

*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup>For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. <sup>13</sup>And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup>But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”*

Now, without getting into all the nuances of what was going on in this church, we see that Paul was deeply concerned that one of the key worship leaders in the church in Antioch, the apostle Peter, here referred to as Cephas, was the source of division—the source of a worship war—in the church! Peter through his influence was causing division in the life of the church, stimulating and provoking the first worship war! Paul saw that this conduct was, as he says, “not in step with the truth of the gospel.” Did you know we can organize our corporate life as a church that we can be out of step with the Gospel? Paul saw that what was happening was undermining the unity that is attained through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **The Gospel: How It Unites Us in Worship**

Paul then goes on to expound on the gospel in the rest of this passage, and how it is that the gospel unites us in worship, and so answers for all time, what it is that ultimately unites humanity as a whole—and that what he explains in verses 15-21. What is it that unites us in corporate worship? The Gospel unites us. Three ways in particular:

### ***First, the gospel unites us in our sin (2:15, 17-18)***

We are united in our sin. This is the first way the gospel unites us in worship. For this is the first thing the gospel points out to us. Before the gospel, which is the ‘good news’ of God’s gracious salvation in Jesus Christ, becomes good news it is ‘bad news.’ The Gospel relays to us who we really are in ourselves: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). That’s what the gospel declares to us who we really are in ourselves. We are all—every one of us—sinners: dirty, rotten, selfish, self-absorbed, God-avoiding and God-denying sinners. Now that’s not politically correct to say, but it is consistently biblical from Genesis to Revelation.

*Gen. 6:5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*

*Ps. 51:5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

*Isa. 53:3 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.*

*Eph. 2:1-3 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

*Rom. 3:10-18 “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” <sup>13</sup> “Their throat (our throat) is an open grave; they (we) use their (our) tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their (our) lips.” <sup>14</sup> “Their (our) mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” <sup>15</sup> “Their (our) feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup>in their (our) paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they (we) have not known.” <sup>18</sup> “There is no fear of God before their (our) eyes.”*

Not a single one of us is free from sin but sometimes we *act* as if we are. This was perhaps the root problem in the church in Antioch. Some were acting as though they weren't quite the same type of sinner as some of those other folks in the church. This was one of the critical things that precipitated the division, and thus the worship war in Antioch. Evidently, the Jewish believers were saying something like this: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and *not Gentile sinners*” (Gal. 2:15).

Yet Paul's response is to point out the common ground of sin. This is the point of Galatians 2:17-18—as if to say that precisely in trying to avoid the implication that you are a sinner, you show yourself to be one! This is like the men who caught the woman in adultery. They were ready to execute her in their own self-righteousness. But Jesus' challenge was blunt and direct: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7).

And in a sense it unites us together with one another in a very real and very important sense. We're all broken. We're all stained. We're all sullied. We're all spoiled. We're all deformed. We're all messed up. None of us is exempt. None of us is who we ought to be. And this is an incredibly unifying and liberating affirmation for the Christian to make: we are in this mess together.

### ***Implications***

One of the implications of being united in sin is that it reminds us of the true nature of worship. “Worship is,” as Harold Best says, “a simultaneous expression of dependency and worth.”<sup>2</sup> It is saying: “In myself and in my sin, I am utterly unworthy. But you, O God, are completely worthy, worthy to be worshiped.” It is also an expression of insufficiency. It is saying: “In myself and in my sin, I am completely insufficient and incomplete. But you, O God, are all-complete and all-sufficient in the perfection of your beauty and holiness.” Worship is what happened to the prophet Isaiah when he saw the Lord, high and lifted up: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5).

---

<sup>2</sup> Harold M. Best, *Worship Through the Eyes of Faith* (Harper Collins, 1993), p. 143.

The second implication is that our worship offerings—our singing, our praying, our preaching—will fall short of all that God intends for them; and often all that we ourselves would desire for them. This is the life we live in ‘this present evil age’ (Gal. 1:4). Therefore, in our pursuit of excellence in worship, we must always remember that this side of glory, we will always be sinners. As someone has wisely and rightly said, “As good as it gets this side of Christ’s return, we’re never going to get it completely right. There will always be a flat tenor, a broken guitar string, an overly loud organ, or a poorly placed hymn.”<sup>3</sup> That’s what it means to sojourn in this present evil age as fallen sinners who are by the grace of God also worshippers.

### ***Second, the gospel unites us by justification by faith in Christ Jesus (2:16)***

So the gospel, first of all, unites us in our sin. This is the ‘bad news’ of the gospel. But this, thankfully, is not the whole story. There is the ‘good news’ of the gospel. And there is another, more profound, way in which the gospel unites us in worship. And that is by being united *through justification by faith in Christ Jesus and not by the works of the law*.

You see, this is where Paul’s argument moves next. From our being united in the predicament of sin to our being united in the pathway of salvation: namely, we are united being justified by faith in Christ Jesus and not by the works of the law.

*We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified (Gal. 2:15-16).*

We see Paul here level the playing field. A person is not made right with God, justified, by any human distinctive of their own. This was the error of the Jewish believers at the time; they assumed that their distinctive Jewish practices, the works of the law, gave them a leg up.

But not according to the apostle Paul. Justification by faith is the great equalizers. Because we have all fallen short of the glory of God, there is only one way to find reconciliation with God: through the merits of Jesus Christ on the cross, which are then received by faith and faith alone.

And so we are all united at the foot of the cross: united in our sin, and united by faith in the meritorious work of Christ for us. No one has a special claim over another; we’re all on equal footing at the foot of the cross.

### ***Implications***

Now because we ourselves are acceptable to God by faith in Christ Jesus and not by works of the law, so too *our worship* is acceptable to God by virtue of our faith in Christ Jesus and not by virtue of our works of any kind. It is by faith in our hearts as we see and behold what we are singing about, and as we embrace it, that God says, “Yes!”

This, in turn, means that God is no more or less impressed by Bach than Chris Tomlin, or by Beethoven than Third Day. Our worship offerings are not justified by works but by faith in Christ Jesus. One does not have more earning power than the other. It is thus not about our technical skill or musicianship but about the posture of our hearts.

---

<sup>3</sup> Reggie Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ’s Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 101-102; cited in Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Other To Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), p. 196.

So too this means that God is far more concerned, in fact, singularly concerned, with the heart of the worshiper and not the offerings in the hand. When it comes to worship, it doesn't matter where or when or in precisely what way. This is precisely why Jesus could say to the Samaritan woman, who assumed that right worship must depend upon right location or environment or time, that the true worshipers the Father seeks are those who worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4: 23-24).

### ***Third, the Gospel unites us through Christ living in me and you (2:19-20)***

Now as fundamental as justification by faith in Christ Jesus is in uniting us in worship, Paul's argument takes us deeper still. In fact, this passage drives us to the very heart of what unites us in worship.

The third and final point is this: the gospel unites through Christ living in me and you. The gospel unites us in worship by creating a new identity. This is Paul's point in 2:19-20:

*For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

But, you see, in order to attain this unity in worship, we must first undergo a death. This is what makes the unity we experience as believers qualitatively different than any unity the world can provide. It is this new identity that ultimately and fundamentally unites us to each other. It is that we have been crucified with Christ. The death of the "I"—the ugly "I"! It is, after all, the ugly "I" that ultimately divides us in worship, isn't it? It is the beautifully glorious Christ who is the source of our unity in faith.

But it is what the gospel does when it arrives on the scene of your life: it executes you—it kills the "I"—your cherished sense of security and identity—and gives to you, creates in you, a new sense of identity through the indwelling of a new person. Christ in me!

So say with me out loud: "I have been crucified with Christ." One more time. "I have been crucified with Christ." That affirmation is the end of worship wars—because dead people don't fight one another. When the ugly "I" is hanging on the executioner's stake and the lovely and undivided Christ is dwelling by faith in your soul: unity in worship!

One of the implications is that we should not be surprised if there is a little pain involved in attaining the unity the gospel brings: it will inevitably involve the further execution of the "I" — the self. Also, we realize that gathering together in a single service does not necessarily unite us in worship. Nor does finding some musical common ground unite us in worship. In fact, nothing we do ultimately unites us in worship. We are only united in worship through the one who lives in me and in you—Jesus Christ. It is the "I" who divides; it is Christ Jesus who unites.

### **Conclusion – Not Nullifying the Grace of God (2:21)**

The implication of all of this for our corporate life of worship is this: we must not nullify the grace of God (v. 21) in our corporate practices and conduct.

#### ***First, let us seek ways to express our unity in concrete ways in corporate worship.***

We must seek to express our unity in corporate worship. We must seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in concrete ways in the life of the church, both for ourselves and for the

world. What a missional witness to the world that would be! This will require humility and grace and patience. See Eph. 4:1-3.

What does this mean, practically speaking? In other words, what would it look like to express our unity in corporate worship? Will it mean forsaking our longstanding tradition of having (at least) two distinct service styles? Will it mean going to one musical expression? Will it mean punctuating the church year with special, combined services, like this one? Will it mean more of you being more intentional in alternating your service attendance: say, four months at the 8:30, four months at the 10:00, four months in the 11:30?

***Second, let us learn to live with – and even enjoy – healthy, biblical tensions.***

This means we must learn to live with—and even enjoy—healthy biblical tensions that are part and parcel of the gospel itself: or instance, being rooted and relevant—rooted in the historic Christian faith and relevant in speaking in ways that are intelligible to our surrounding culture; head and heart; spontaneous and planned; joyous and reverent. That’s one of the ways that, as we grow, we will be able to live with each other better. The world doesn’t like to live with tension because living with tension means work and strain. Living with these tensions is a powerful witness to the world. One way we can nullify the grace of God is by having a church service that any good sociologist could explain. If you can explain what goes on here without having to appeal to the grace of God, then we are not doing something right. We are not walking in step with the truth of the gospel.

***Third, let us always keep the Lamb at the center of our worship.***

Third, most importantly, we must seek always to make much of Jesus Christ. He is what unites. This is the main thing. Revelation 5 and the worship of the Lamb—there will not be a traditional and contemporary service, but one service, one Lamb, one congregation!

*Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup>And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” <sup>3</sup>And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, <sup>4</sup> and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. <sup>5</sup>And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”*

*<sup>6</sup> And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup>And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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,  
<sup>10</sup> and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.”*

*<sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup>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!" <sup>13</sup> 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!" <sup>14</sup> And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.*

Amen.