



With Angels and Archangels: Worship in the Book of Revelation

By the Rev. Dr. Charles Gieschen

Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind

Heaven is understood too often as a faraway place with which Christians have no contact until after death. The Book of Revelation, however, helps us to see that heaven is not an "up there" and purely "future" reality, but an accessible and present reality that we participate in through the Divine Service. For where the Holy Trinity comes through His means of grace and is present, there we are brought into the reality of heaven. It is no accident that we often use the scriptural songs of angels in our liturgy (e.g., "This Is the Feast," the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the *Sanctus*) and also acknowledge that we sing *with them*: "Therefore, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You and saying..." (Conclusion of the Proper Preface). The Book of Revelation, because of its recurrent scenes of heavenly worship that are regularly punctuated by hymns of praise, is one of the church's richest resources for understanding her worship.

The accessibility of heaven is emphasized in the Book of Revelation with the imagery of the "open door" (3:8, 20; 4:1). After the Risen Christ appears on the island of Patmos and speaks to John, thereby demonstrating He is the living Lord of His Church who is not absent nor confined to a heavenly sphere (chapters 1-3), then John sees an open door: "After these things I looked, and, behold, *a door* that has been opened in heaven, and the first voice that I heard as a trumpet was speaking to me, saying, 'Come up here, and I will show you what will necessarily happen after these things'" (4:1). John is brought by the Spirit through this open door and beholds the divine

throne room. There he sees and hears what is normally not perceived with our five senses: the brilliant mystery of God (the Father) enthroned, angels gathered around Him singing "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God" (4:8; cf., Is. 6:3), and saints casting their crowns before Him as they sing, "Worthy are You, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" (4:11).

This amazing open-door-to-heaven scene climaxes with the revelation of the "Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" who can open the sealed scroll in the right hand of the Father (5:5). One expects to see the spectacular "one like a Son of Man" who appeared earlier to John (1:12-18), but instead he sees in the midst of the throne: "a Lamb who is standing, [bloodied] as though it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes" (5:6). This portrait, without doubt, is the most memorable and powerful among the ever-changing scenes of this book. The entirety of the person and work of Christ is flashed before the eyes of the faithful in order that they see and believe: His almighty divinity (seven horns and eyes), His true humanity (a lamb who died), and His sacrifice for sin on Calvary's cross (slaughtered) that resulted in the resurrection victory (standing and enthroned). Because the Lamb is understood to be of the mystery of the one enthroned God, He is worshipped with words and actions that parallel the earlier worship of the Father: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (5:12). The oneness of this Lamb with the Father as the object of worship is further emphasized as the whole cosmos joins in praise: "To Him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever" (5:13). Although Revelation overtly confesses the trinitarian nature of God (1:4-5), the Lamb remains the visible focus of the worship of this one true God.

In light of this open-door-to-heaven scene, some of us may say, "Oh, how I wish I could be John and see what he saw!" We, however, should not feel this way. John was commanded to write down what he saw in order that, through this book, others would truly "see" what John saw (1:11). By means of reading or hearing this holy revelation (1:3), we, too, pass through the "open door" and behold the mystery of God.

Furthermore, this experience of heaven does not result solely--or even primarily--from reading the Book of Revelation. It is not insignificant that John had this experience on the Lord's Day (Sunday), the typical day for Christians to gather for worship that includes the Lord's Supper (1:10). The understanding that other faithful Christians can pass through the "open door" of heaven in the context of Lord's Day worship is the basis for the two invitations of Christ concerning this "door" given to the congregations in Philadelphia and Laodicea (3:8, 20). The Book of Revelation calls those who have been washed and clothed in white through the sealing with the Divine Name in Holy Baptism "a kingdom and *priests* to our God *who reign on earth*" (5:10; cf., Ex. 29:4-9). Christians on earth, therefore, are "priests" who have an "open door" to the heavenly sanctuary!

There is a fairly widespread misunderstanding that the various scenes of the Book of Revelation describe *future* realities. The worship in chapters 4-5 and elsewhere, therefore, is sometimes understood to be depicting only what it will be like when the saints are brought into heaven, and not *present* reality. Jesus clears the fog on this issue when He states: "Write down what you see, (namely) *what is* and *what is to come*" (1:19). John sees scenes that depict present reality ("what is") as well as those that portray future reality ("what is to come"). These worship scenes depict a present and eternal reality: the God "who is, was, and is to come" and the Lamb who has already

been sacrificed for our sin, raised in victory, and enthroned in glory. These scenes are not merely what heaven will be like some day; while they are certainly that, they also depict what heaven is *now* as God brings us into His presence through the Divine Service. They serve as a vivid commentary on what is happening in the Divine Service, especially in the Lord's Supper, where the Paschal Lamb who shed His blood and gave His body is present sharing His victory. This bloodied and standing Lamb depicted in Revelation is the same one in whose real presence we stand as we sing, "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us" and then partake of His life-giving flesh and blood.

There are those who view Christian worship as an escape from reality, almost like taking a weekly fantasy trip to Disney World in order to enjoy a reprieve from the "real world" of work. The Book of Revelation helps us to see that such an assessment could not be further from the truth! Rather than escaping reality, worship leads us to experience reality in its fullness. Revelation helps us to "see" that the reality of God and angels, the Lamb and His victory, is as real as--and more determinative for the future than--Satan and this world's powerful rulers. "Seeing" this reality helps us to recognize, face, and conquer the chaos of this sinful world. Richard Bauckham, in his fine book *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, states:

Worship, which is so prominent in the theocentric vision of Revelation, has nothing to do with pietistic retreat from the public world. It is the source of resistance to the idolatries of the public world. It points representatively to the acknowledgment of the true God by all the nations, in the universal worship for which the whole creation is destined (pp. 160-161).

There is evidence in Jewish literature written in the centuries immediately before the Christian era of a significant debate concerning how time should be reckoned, either by a lunar calendar (354 days) or a solar calendar (364 days). Why was this an important debate for particular Jews? Because they were very concerned that their worship be in synch with the worship of heaven; they did not want to be observing Sabbath or a festival on earth out of step with the heavenly observance. Such a concern for the congruence between worship in heaven and on earth hardly characterizes much of the church today. Rather than worship reflecting the ever-changing cultures of this earth and whims of men, it should reflect that which has been revealed by God as eternal and of heaven, such as we find in the Book of Revelation. The *description* of worship in heaven in Holy Scripture is *prescriptive* for the church on earth, even as we pray: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." One day the congruence between worship on earth and in heaven will be complete: "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (7:17)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| << Go to Previous Article | For the Life of the World | Contents of this Number | Go to Next Article >> |
|---|---|---|---|