

[*MJTM* 13 (2011–2012) 3–14]

THE REFORMATION OF WORSHIP: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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John Jefferson Davis. *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010. Pp. 231. Pbk. US\$22.00. ISBN10: 0-8308-3884-8. ISBN 13: 978-0-8308-3884-4.

Michael J. Gorman. *Reading Revelation Responsibly. Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010. Pp. xviii + 211. Pbk. US\$25.00. ISBN 10: 1-60608-560-8; ISBN 13: 978-1-60608-560-8.

Ben Witherington III. *We Have Seen His Glory: A Vision of Kingdom Worship*. Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. Pp. x + 166. Pbk. US\$16.00. ISBN 10: 9780802865281. ISBN 13: 978-0802865281.

Concern for the renewal of congregational worship in the post-Christian West can be measured either in terms of the anxiety frequently exhibited by congregational and denominational leaders, or in relation to the continuing flood of popular and academic discussions that address this question. Three of the latter bear comparison because, intentionally or otherwise, they together reveal not only the contours of the current debate but also its unanticipated limitations.

John Jefferson Davis laments the loss of any sense of God's "real presence" in evangelical worship, a conclusion that arises from having visited 35 different worship services, representing a

range of denominations and styles, in the course of a sabbatical leave. His concern is that evangelical worship focuses attention on human agents at the expense of a transcendent and holy God, and to that extent has become theologically and liturgically impoverished. This is, ultimately, less a concern for the proper conduct of evangelical worship than a call to examine the theological world view—Davis prefers to speak of “ontology”—that gives rise to proper worship. He names the alternatives that compete for our attention as scientific materialism on the one hand (with a correlative skepticism regarding miracles, the supernatural generally, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in particular), and digital virtualism on the other (which reinforces subjectivism, elevates the role of experience, and makes the individual the arbiter of reality). In opposition to these he proposes a robust Trinitarian theism. Surveying the landscape of contemporary American evangelicalism, he calls for “a church marked by the attributes *deep, thick, different*” (32)—“deep” in terms of spirituality, “thick” in its interpersonal commitments and relationships, and distinctively “different” from mainstream American culture. According to Davis:

The renewal of contemporary worship calls for a return to the first principles and foundations of the worship experience, beginning with an examination of the fundamental nature and essential being of the *participants* involved in worship: God, the church and the self (38; emphasis original).

Thus he appeals for a new “epistemology of faith” (54) that focuses on a God who is “heavy” (substantive, non-derivative), holy (thus awesome and numinous), joyful (rejoicing in creation, and especially in redemption), beautiful (as reflected in creation), relational (according to the foundational categories of Trinitarian theology), and available (whereby humanity is invited into the inner-divine community). The church is by consequence to be considered “high” (reflecting the transcendence of God), “heavy” (reflecting the gravity of God’s purpose), and “theanthropic” (embodying the dynamics of the divine-human relationship; 60–66). In contrast to individually-focused, therapeutic, and consumerist versions of the “modern

autonomous self,” he views worshipers as Trinitarian (having been adopted into communion with the Holy Trinity), ecclesial (characterized by reconciliation with others), and doxological (created for worship).

Against the anti-sacramentalism and iconoclasm of the Reformation, a post-Enlightenment turn to moralism at the expense of transcendence, and an emphasis on personality and performance derived from Revivalism, Davis argues for the

ontologically distinct nature of the space and time within which the worship-event takes place. The claim here is that, according to the theology of the New Testament, space and time themselves are altered and no longer ordinary space and ordinary time (92).

Worship, he contends, constitutes “sacred ‘time travel,’” in which “Sacred past and promised future are ontologically and not merely metaphorically present in the worship-event.” “Similarly,” he continues, “the spatial context of Sunday worship . . . is not ordinary space, but is transformed, spiritually, into sacred, kingdom space” (92–93). In practical terms, this leads Davis to advocate a “fourfold pattern of biblical worship” consisting of “gathering, ministry of the Word, ministry of the table, dismissal” (97). Notwithstanding his earlier disparagement of the digital realm, Davis invokes digital analogies, in particular virtual reality, to illustrate his argument (the communion of saints as akin to participation in the simulated “World of Warcraft” [107–10]; the Spirit as a holographic projection of Christ “into the midst of the believing church gathered around the table” [164]).

Following a lengthy historical review that cites (amongst many others) Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, he affirms the “real presence” of Christ at the Eucharist. Intending to call the church back to a “right administration of the sacraments,” Davis is optimistic that a new appropriation of traditional formularies (e.g., the *sursum corda*; “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again”) and frequent eucharistic celebration will together serve as effective means of congregational revitalization (165–66). But this thesis is subject to a simple test: if better liturgy produces better churches, then traditionally liturgical/

sacramental congregations should, on the whole, be thriving. That they are in no better shape than the constituency Davis seeks to address is, to say the least, problematic for his argument.

It is clear that, for Davis, a robust theological and historical understanding is essential to proper worship: better *understanding* makes for better worship. But this is an assumption, and not entirely consonant either with Davis's emphasis on the renewal of praxis, or with his own report of having experienced a "'glorious' . . . sense of the presence of God" in worship, the power of which he attributes not to liturgical acumen, but to intercessory prayer (197 n. 25). Furthermore, an unacknowledged conflict arises in the course of this discussion. On the one hand, Davis states unequivocally that "throughout the Bible . . . the initiative in true worship is God's" (62). In Exodus, for example,

it is God who has "called the meeting" at his own initiative, not the people . . . God is the central actor in biblical worship, not the people; the people assemble at God's command, and they respond to his actions and directive words (98; cf. 99 n. 43).

Modern evangelicals need to rediscover the biblical truth that in true worship it is God, not us, who is the central reality and the central actor (100).

But this sense of divine priority is difficult to reconcile with the foregoing discussion of liturgical renewal, or with explicit statements that seem to assume the opposite:

When the church gathers itself together intentionally as a church, in the name of the Lord Jesus, as an assembly of God for the worship of God, *then* God himself is present, and the church can experience its full theanthropic and anthropological weight . . . (66; emphasis added).

Christian churches need to *constitute in their practices*—especially in their practices of worship—alternative plausibility structures that can *embody and experience* the presence of the divine . . . (83; emphasis added).

A concluding chapter (“From Ontology to Doxology: From Theory to Practice in Worship Renewal”) essentially recapitulates the foregoing argument in practical terms, once more affirming “the real presence of God as the central reality of every worship service” (173), reiterating the church’s uniquely “theanthropic” and “charismatic” identity, and offering various practical suggestions for worship leadership. Here the term “theanthropic” bears closer scrutiny:

The church is unique because it is, at the core of its being, in its fundamental reality, the only theanthropic (“God-bonded-to-man”) reality in the universe, the likes of which never has been seen before and never will be again, a reality in which the members are bonded forever to the triune God—the gold standard of reality—in the communion of the Holy Spirit (176).

Although Davis contends that “our theanthropic union with God the Father [is] through Jesus Christ, in the communion of the Holy Spirit,” surely his argument makes claims for the church that apply more properly—and uniquely—to Christ. More specifically, this proposal seems to overlook the vicarious humanity of Christ (as articulated by Athanasius and Calvin, and reiterated more recently by T. F. Torrance and Andrew Purves), a proper appreciation of which maintains the priority and unsubstutable character of Christ’s ministry on behalf of the church.¹

This theological distinction points to an unresolved tension that underlies the book as a whole (and much of evangelical worship as well): why, if the church is by nature “high, heavy, and theanthropic,” does its worship so often fail to express this truth? Conversely, if this is antecedently the church’s true character, in what way might adjustments to worship *practice* serve to effect congregational renewal? Stated differently, while Davis properly insists that “in true worship it is God, not us, who is the central reality and the central actor” (100), much of his argument focuses instead on human agency. A clearer resolution

1. See, for example, Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004, 47–77.

to the basic question of “who does what” is, surely, critical to any rediscovery of biblical worship. Still, Davis is by no means alone in being unable to solve this impasse.

Not unlike those of Davis, Ben Witherington’s observations on worship were occasioned by two considerations: the absence of any comprehensive treatment of the subject by other biblical scholars, and the experience of pastoring six churches in the course of a thirty-year academic career.

He begins with an exposition of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4, concluding that “Jesus is inaugurating a worship without temples, priests and literal sacrifices, all of which are said to be fulfilled by and in Jesus” (8). Next comes an exposition of Revelation 4 and 5, much of which reproduces the text of a lengthy sermon (13–20). Here Witherington observes, “The chief aim of worship is that we be caught up in wonder, love, and praise of God, and thereby get a glimpse of the heavenly worship which happens when and as we are worshipping” (19). How this should transpire is less clear: again, such worship is apparently initiated by God (21), yet according to Witherington, John of the Apocalypse likely prepared himself beforehand to receive the heavenly vision (“he had already immersed himself in the divine presence before the vision came . . . he had prepared his heart to worship, he had repented of his sins . . . and so he boldly approached the Presence”; 17), and therefore so must we. In the ensuing treatment of 2 Cor 3:18, Witherington proposes that while it is God who transforms the worshipper, “Adoration is the means of our glorification. Glorifying God is the means of our transformation into Christ’s image” (25). Likewise in the discussion of Rom 12:2 (“do not be conformed . . . but be transformed”), the key verbs are said to refer “to a constant and ongoing process that requires one to work at de-enculturating oneself and re-orienting oneself” (37–38). Yet this assertion ignores the theological implications of the passive voice in both verbs. In each case the implication seems to be that proper conduct on the part of the church is essential to true worship; indeed that worship, rightly performed, creates the vision of which it speaks.

If this is the case then, as Davis also argues, improvements to the conduct of worship might be expected to improve the congregants' experience of worship. As previously, however, such a proposal raises difficult theological issues: particularly in light of Christology, in what way does worship constitute a theological vision when worship itself is ostensibly a response to that vision?

Witherington deals at some length with questions of Jewish influence on the worship of the early church: theological discontinuity, in that Jewish worship is oriented to rest and Sabbath, whereas Christian worship looks forward to the fulfillment of the new creation (Chapter 3); continuity in the adoption from synagogal practice of structured worship, hierarchical leadership structures, and the use of purpose-built edifices (Chapter 4). Next comes an exposition of Eph 5:18–20 and Col 3:16–17 (“psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs”): “What these verses suggest is both old and new elements in Christian worship when it came to music” (66). This leads to discussion of doxological fragments embedded in the New Testament (Phil 2:6–11, Jude 24–25, Heb 13:20–21) and an extended exposition of the Lord's Prayer (according to Matthew) in relation to chapter 10 of the *Didache* (68–84).

Chapter 6, “Illuminating the Good News,” addresses “The Oral and Rhetorical World of the Apostles.” The chapter begins with an introduction to and defense of rhetorical analysis of New Testament letters as documents intended for oral performance (with a corollary dismissal of epistolary analysis). Next comes lengthy discussion of “The Preaching of Early Christian Orators” (Hebrews as alternating between *synkresis* and paraenesis; First John as “epideictic rhetoric”; James as diatribe and enthymematic argumentation; First Corinthians as “deliberative discourse”; 98–122). The relevance of this section to an understanding of worship as an activity in its own right, whether ancient or modern, is unclear at best. The same observation applies to the treatment of Paul's refusal to accept remuneration from the Corinthian church (123–26). As the footnotes indicate, much of this material appears to represent a condensation of discussions that the author has published in fuller form elsewhere. To this point, one gets the impression of a series of notes

and observations only loosely organized under the heading of “worship,” but lacking a single, consistently argued thesis.

The last two chapters are perhaps the strongest section of the book, as they come closer to articulating the theological vision that, for Witherington, underlies Christian worship. As he observes in relation to Col 2:20–23:

I submit that Christian worship should be living out of the new realities, the new life we have in Christ, the new focus on the heavenly Christ who will one day return, and not focussing on anything earthly: the old earthly forms of worship, the old ascetical practices, the old ethnic, social, and secular distinctions . . . In short, all actions should be doxological (135–36).

This is followed by sensitive and thoughtful discussions of the place of work (and Sabbath) in relation to prayer and worship within the new creation inaugurated by Christ (139–40), and of Paul’s ethic of mutual responsibility (2 Thess 3:6–13; Gal 6:2–6) within the community of faith. Chapter 8 (“Doxology: The End and Aim of All Things”) continues to draw together the diverse strands of the foregoing discussion, emphasizing the priority of theological substance over style (154), with particular attention to doxology (“The focus must be on God and the glory must be given to God,” 154) and Christology (“Christian worship should most often have a Christocentric focus,” 155).

At this point, however, the same critical tension between human and divine agency emerges once more: “The Bible says that without vision the people perish, and this is especially true without a vision of proper worship, for *worship is the means God uses to mold us into our better selves*” (150; emphasis original). If that is indeed the case, surely John Jefferson Davis has nothing to complain about: faithful worship should, of necessity, successfully invoke the reality of which it speaks. Conversely, if Davis’s complaints are valid, Witherington needs to account more fully for his assertion, and provide an explanation of how such transformation actually takes place. Although its title promises *A Vision of Kingdom Worship*, perhaps it would be fairer to say that this book for the most part describes selected components of first-century Christian worship *practice*, without,

however, adequately exploring the actual vision that gave (and gives) rise to such worship, or makes worship possible in the face of human inadequacy. For that we must turn to the worship of John on Patmos.

In many ways the most helpful of the three studies is Michael Gorman's treatment of the book of Revelation, which is unexpected because explaining worship is only one aspect of the author's broader exegetical purpose. Yet in the course of exposition Gorman manages to describe the inner dynamic of worship, attending less to matters of "when," "where," and "how" (the primary focus of the previous two works) than to the more central question of "why": "As a prophetic summons to first-commandment faithfulness, Revelation is both a call to worship the true God and a call to forsake all false deities" (34). Worship, Gorman affirms, is essentially a political gesture, a public declaration of one's allegiance and orientation to that which is theologically (and therefore also socially, politically, and culturally) absolute. The difference in this case is that the Book of Revelation is explicit about the vision—or visions—that impel worship, and the distinctive gestures to which different visions give rise.

Where Gorman ventures next will occasion a sharp intake of breath on the part of at least some readers, for we are treated to an extended, carefully nuanced discussion both of Roman imperial theology (including worship of the emperor) and—in painful detail—of American civil religion. This juxtaposition provides the context for Gorman's main thesis: "*Revelation is a manifesto against civil religion and a summons to uncivil worship and witness*" (55). Such analyses are not new, but what makes Gorman's treatment striking is his intentional address to that segment of the American church which—ironically—values the Book of Revelation most highly:

I would contend, in fact, that the most alluring and dangerous deity in the United States is the omnipresent, syncretistic god of nationalism mixed with Christianity lite: religious beliefs, language, and practices that are superficially Christian but infused with national myths and habits. Sadly, most of this civil religion's practitioners belong to

Christian churches, which is precisely why Revelation is addressed to the seven *churches* (not to Babylon), to all Christians tempted by the civil cult (56).

Such an approach will not endear the book to its intended audience, any more than will Gorman's extended critique of the "Left Behind" series (and its take on Revelation) in the following chapter, or his deconstruction of historical dispensationalism.

More positively, Gorman's particular contribution is to expound the proper rationale for authentic worship, which is a renewed vision of God such as that which John experienced on the island of Patmos: "Revelation provides this vision of 'uncivil' worship . . . centered on the throne of the eternal holy God and the faithful slaughtered Lamb, and on the coming new creation" (76). Accordingly, Gorman identifies the throne room scene in Revelation 4–5 as the theological anchor and "hermeneutical . . . key" (103) for the book of Revelation as a whole. Worship, in this view (and not just the worship depicted within the book itself), begins with a vision of the Lamb who was slain, and his redemption of creation by means of paradoxical "power in weakness," thereby revealing the true character and purpose of God. For readers familiar with Gorman's approach to Paul (especially *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* [Eerdmans, 2001] and *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* [Eerdmans, 2009]), this interpretation will come as no surprise. But such an approach is especially relevant in the case of Revelation, both because of the powerlessness of its original recipients and (more pertinently) because of a tendency on the part of some to read the book today in a manner that buttresses their own theologies of "coercive divine power" (111).

This is not to say that Gorman has an obvious political or theological axe to grind: he is content, rather, simply to sketch out the essential plot contours and key players in the eschatological drama. Here a central theological dynamic of Revelation is the contrast between true and false worship: between the demonic powers and human institutions that claim ultimate allegiance, and God who alone is worthy of it. "Faithful witness"

in this context is thus a matter of faithful, rightly oriented worship, whether or not it succeeds in persuading others to follow suit (132). Rather than inveighing against contemporary evils, however, Gorman to this point maintains a light touch, identifying areas where the book of Revelation should inspire more careful theological reflection. Foremost among the latter are the question of whether followers of the slain Lamb may serve in the military, and how Christian economic practice can “promote justice and the healing of the nations” (149).

As might be expected, much of the discussion focuses on the problematic issue of divine judgment, and of the role of the saints in its execution. Here Gorman affirms that the saints’ cry for justice (Rev 6:9–11; 19:1–4) is itself an expression of worship, which celebrates the righteous agency of God rather than seeking retribution or taking up arms: “The church celebrates the victory it has longed for only because the judgment of Babylon means the salvation of the world” (158). Likewise the vision of a harmonious human community—the “New Jerusalem”—with which Revelation concludes is implicitly liturgical. From this perspective worship is less an activity to be conducted at a particular time or place, or in a particular manner, than it is an integral aspect of life in the presence of God: there is no temple in the city because “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22; so pp. 163, 166–67).

In the last analysis, worship is a function of spirituality, the focus of Gorman’s concluding chapter. Indeed, “worship” heads a list of seven topics that he discusses in summarizing the “performative or narrative spirituality” (178) inculcated by this book. Here Gorman’s critique of civil religion becomes more pointed, as he urges the church to abandon its customary celebration of “syncretistic patriotism” in favor of faithful testimony to the suffering and triumphant Lamb:

That this self-evident truth about worship seems so odd, so radical, simply demonstrates how comfortable the church has become in bed with the beast.

The choice between the two, Gorman insists, “*is an either-or proposition with very serious consequences*” (179–80; emphasis

original). From this point proceed discussions of spiritual discernment, prophetic resistance, self-criticism, non-violent speech and action, communal witness, and hope.

As contemporary evangelicals (and others) search for a new sense of worship, a comparison of these three studies indicates how much easier it is to focus on particular forms of worship, or to urge more faithful practice in hope of effecting congregational change. This is not to disparage such approaches, which have much to offer by way of practical advice. But in the last analysis, for the church to escape the dual dangers of formalism and Pelagianism that currently mute and numb so much of its testimony will require a more bracing challenge of the sort that Gorman offers, a true re-visioning of our worship that focuses on the One who not only deserves but inspires it. My guess is that *Reading Revelation Responsibly* will be dismissed as “un-Christian” by those who most need to hear it. Yet of the three it makes by far the most trenchant observations on the nature of worship, and has the most to offer towards the renewal of worship in the church today.

In hindsight, might it be that attention to performance and participation, proper leadership and appropriate form, are the problem rather than the solution to much of what ails evangelical worship today? In a manner that is difficult to distinguish from the broader tendencies of Western culture, the church seems profoundly addicted to performance and spectacle, to the creation of “meaningful experiences” for the benefit of participants. But might it be, in fact, that God resists our attempts at making him relevant, and that “consumer satisfaction” (however carefully construed) is ultimately incompatible with true worship? Against all expectation, it is the vision of a suffering exile, one seemingly least able to effect change in the church of his day, that offers the most sobering and salutary insights into the nature of worship and the possibility of its renewal today.