

ORDER FOR THE CORPORATE WORSHIP OF GOD

A Service of Celebration and Covenantal Renewal

MEDITATION AND PREPARATION—

*“God will devote, not destroy, the culture we have made that has gone awry – the things and the ways we have filled and subdued the earth. The filthy factories, the mighty skyscrapers, the boastful monuments, the cruel weapons – all are in for ‘the day of the Lord,’ a day of destructive devotion.... Heaven will be a cultural place. We will again interact with other people, designing things, trading things, keeping traditions, enjoying a vibrant cultural life. ‘the contents of the City will be more akin to our present cultural patterns than is usually acknowledged in discussions of the afterlife.’ Mouw writes, as he explained to me in an interview, ‘The fruits of culture will be gathered into the Holy City, and I want to emphasize: none of this was wasted, none of this is irrelevant to God...Somehow it’s going to count for the gathering in of all the new creation.’” (Nathan L. K. Bierma, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*)*

GATHERING MUSIC

WELCOME

INVOCATION

—Elder Terry Shafer

CALL TO WORSHIP

—Rev. Mike Smith

Psalms 19 (NIV)

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
- 2 Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
- 4 Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,
- 5 which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
- 6 It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is hidden from its heat.

WORSHIP THROUGH SONG

Lyric sheets of today’s music can be obtained from the ushers upon request

PASTORAL PRAYER

GIVING OF TITHES AND OFFERINGS

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

—Rev. Kevin Twit

The Present and Future of Heaven, Pt. 6

The God Of All Cultures From The First To The Last

Revelation 21:1-5; 22-27

Introduction: NT Wright calls the Christian idea of hope a surprising one. Surprising because, in spite of the amazing uniformity of belief in the early church, in our own day we have bought into some seriously unbiblical ideas about heaven and the Christian view of the future hope of the world. *What is surprising about the picture we see here in Revelation 21?*

1. There is stuff in the heavenly city – it is not just a place where souls contemplate the divine forever and ever in bodiless bliss. The kings bring their splendor or riches into the city – they bring stuff, good stuff, the richest productions of humanity, into this city. This is not a platonic vision.

God created a physical world – and not just a raw creation, but a cultivated garden – and invited His people to work it and to bring to fruition all of the God-glorifying potential He had built into His creation.

But, mankind rebelled against this vision and rejected the good work God gave us to do! All of creation declares His glory (Psalm 19) but in our sin we try to make His creation declare *our* glory! All culture is a dialog with God using the stuff He made and stamped with meaning, sometimes to amplify what He is saying and sometimes to try to make it say something else than what God created it to say (Scott Turnau) Examples: Work and sex

2. It is the kings of all the earth who bring their stuff into this city – in other words, we have here a multicultural vision. *“Diverse cultural riches will be brought into the Heavenly City. That which has been parceled out [among various cultures] in human history must now be collected for the glory of the Creator.” (Richard Mouw “When The Kings Come Marching In” pg. 86)*

Kings were more than just political rulers in the Bible’s culture, they set the cultural tone as well. *“To assemble kings together, then, was in an important sense to assemble their national cultures together... This is why Isaiah and John could link the entrance of the kings into the City with the gathering in of the wealth of the nations.” (Mouw pg. 50)*

This multicultural is not a left turn in the storyline of the Bible – God has always cared about all of the nations of the earth and has intended for the people of God to be a people of every race, tongue, and tribe! (Rev 5, Isaiah 49:6). John actually bases what he says about the kings of the earth upon the picture in Isaiah 60.

And there are numerous other places that anticipate this multi-cultural vision we see in Rev 21. When the Spirit is poured out at the day of Pentecost, the people *don't* all speak the same language – as if God's goal was to merge all the cultures of the world into one – instead they maintain their cultural distinctive while declaring the gospel in their own languages because no one culture can fully capture what it means to declare God's goodness!

God has been the God of the whole earth from the beginning – but God's people have often struggled with that. The Israelites never lived as a blessing to the nations and the Judaizers taught the Galatians that they needed to adopt Jewish culture to be truly pleasing to God. The irony to all of this is that Christianity rightly understood is the most flexible religion there is culturally-speaking. When the apostles declared in Acts 15 that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish to be truly pleasing to God it opened the door for the gospel to be incarnated in all the cultures of the world. This is different than Islam or Hinduism.

This means we can and should extol the goodness of creation and the good things about the products of human culture, even culture produced by people who don't worship Jesus. (This has implications for how parents interact with their teenagers about culture!) We must live in this tension – nothing is perfect, everything has something in it to commend and we must work hard to do so. Every aspect of culture is in dialog with God – and we must humble ourselves and admit that sometimes those creating one aspect of culture hear things that others miss.

Do our tastes reflect this multicultural vision? Does our worship imply that we believe God requires us to adopt one pure cultural expression of the gospel? *“If our churches truly reflected the diversity that they should then everybody would expect to sing songs they don't like.”* (Marva Dawn)

3. Yes, but... how can stuff made by sinful people be brought into the Heavenly City? Our text says that no impure thing will be in the City (vs. 27)! The only explanation for this is that God has not given up on His creation and had to settle for just pure human souls! God's redemptive and transforming work will not be limited to saving human souls but must extend to even the things they have made is this vision is to be reality!

Our God is a God of dogged perseverance. Humans have sought to fill the creation with the idolatrous production of their culture in opposition to God, but *still* God is going to fill His city with the culture of human beings. (Mouw) *“[T]here is startling symbolism in God's act of putting the glories of pagan culture in his heavenly city. God finds it less worthwhile to eliminate cultural artifacts than to humble them. Humans can try all they want to make things to glorify themselves; God will only take them and turn them to his glory... Christ's redeeming work was done to restore nature, culture, and human beings. Now that's good news. 'The total work of Christ is nothing less than to redeem this entire creation from the effects of sin,' writes Anthony Hoekema.”* (Nathan Bierma)

Take note! God does not welcome everyone and everything just as they are into the City! This is vastly different than the postmodern utopia where everyone is welcomed because there is no judge or judgments that can be made. And in fact, the Bible is not just always pro-culture. All cultures reflect God in some way – but all cultures must stand before God in judgment! And there may be a picture of that in our text as well. Richard Mouw points out that in Isaiah 60:11 the picture of the

kings is that they are led in procession and that in Isaiah 14:2 God promises His people that someday they will “take captive those who were their captors and rule over those who oppressed them.” Thus he argues that part of the vision is the kings coming into the city to be held accountable for the way they used power and to face judgment as rulers before the Ruler of All. He includes in this judgment even Christian rulers who persecuted other believers. *“Kings and queens will bow before the widows and orphans they have oppressed... White racist politicians will wither under the gaze of black children.”* (pg. 60) He suggests it will not go on forever but will come as the sort of “closing-off of sinful history.”

At the very least we must see that the kings have been humbled as they come before God. Notice that the kings bring their treasures into the city – they don't hoard them or use them as bargaining chips to get a good seat at the banquet table at the marriage feast of the lamb! The kings of the earth use their treasures in this life to display their power but now these treasures are used for a very different purpose. The picture here is a picture of radical transformation.

4. What we see here is a vision of both continuity with the present world and transformation and cleansing as well. The separation of the soul from the body when we die, is a temporary state – it is not our ultimate destination. And believing that our temporary destination is our ultimate destination can't help but bring a skewed sense of what we were made for and the kinds of things we should be investing in.

This explains why Paul's application at the end of 1Cor 15 is to work hard in this life because our labor for the kingdom is not in vain! He does not say, *“don't waste your time working for justice and beauty and truth, here in this world, because when Jesus comes back again he is just going to scrap the whole thing anyway.”* When we explore what the Bible actually teaches about the new heavens and new earth one of the things that might come as quite a shock is that the Bible teaches there is a continuity between that world and ours – God will redeem our efforts. (see NT Wright's book “Surprised By Hope.”) While we don't build it ourselves - the city comes down, it is not erected from the ground up like the tower of Babel – the Bible teaches that there is continuity between the labor we expend for the kingdom now and the shape and character of the city to come. (1Cor 15:58)

Applications

1. There is no easy one-size-fits-all approach to culture. (D.A. Carson argues this point persuasively in his new book “Christ and Culture Revisited.”) We are called both to affirm and protest the cultures we find ourselves in. And for most people, they will find it easier to do one than the other. But it is vital to understand, that separating ourselves from the culture in which we live always makes it more difficult, if not impossible, to both affirm and protest the way we should. The kings bring their glory into the City – but no impure thing is in the City. Both of these truths must guide us in how we deal with culture.

2. God has not given up on his good creation – even though we often use it to say something very different than what God intended it to say. But the good news is that our God gets the last word! He will restore His creation to its purpose, and end its frustration when he brings his people the full consummation of what they were made for – glorious physical bodies in the perfected new heavens and new earth.

3. It's not just people who were made to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, it was the whole of creation – and this is not just a command, it is a promise! The Lord is committed to seeing His will fully realized one day and teaches us to work and pray to that end. “Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.” And of course to pray this prayer with integrity means to offer ourselves and our work as part of the answer to the prayer.

4. Those of different cultures are already members of the Heavenly City that is to come – and this citizenship is what defines us. It is fascinating how the gospel deconstructs all of the things people use to try to define themselves, what they do, their race, their gender, their family. In the kingdom, these things are real (Christians are not Gnostics who think all that matters are our pure souls stripped of our “earth suits”) but these things are not what ultimately define who we are.

COMMUNION

Welcome to our celebration of the Lord's Supper. All who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior are invited to be served. If you do not profess saving faith in Jesus, we ask that you refrain from taking communion and encourage you to prayerfully consider speaking with a Pastor or Elder. To receive the bread and cup—the body and blood of Christ broken and shed for you— please come forward to the nearest table and an Elder will serve you. Elders and Deacons are available to help guide you. If you cannot come to the table, please let a Deacon or Elder know and you will be served at your seat.

RESPONSE TO THE LORD THROUGH GIVING

—DEACONS OFFERING

We who drink of Jesus' grace are to be those who offer a cup of cold water of mercy in his name.

BENEDICTION



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

1. Where in our culture are people hearing things that the church has missed? Are there certain subjects the church seems to often be deaf to that those who aren't Christians could help us hear?
2. What are some of the subtle (and not so subtle) ways the church today works against the physical, multicultural vision of the Heavenly City we see in Rev. 21.
3. What are some practices (in worship and elsewhere) that the church could embrace that would help us get more in tune with the City that is to come?
4. Reflect on 1Cor 15:58 and the implications for the kingdom work you feel called to invest in.