

The first spiritual resource – worship

Revelation 14:1 – 5

Fairview Presbyterian Church

October 31, 2010

Reformation Sunday

A basic bible message: God acts, we react

A basic message of the Bible is this: God acts, we react. God always takes the initiative. We are the responders. It is helpful to keep this in mind as we begin our study of chapter 14 of Revelation. In chapters 12 and 13 we met Satan's counterfeits: the dragon (Satan himself), the sea beast (antichristian government) and the land beast (false religion). These are the forces of Satan at work in our world.

It is a natural question, "How are we to respond?" What resources does a Christian have to stand against Satan, idolatrous government, and deceptive and false teaching? Chapter 14 will highlight three spiritual resources provided by God to nurture and strengthen his people, the church, during this age. The three sections of chapter 14 are each demarcated when John declares, "and I saw" (v. 1, 6, 14). In summary, the three spiritual resources described and seen by John are: worship, preaching and evangelism.

This may be surprising to some. Worship is a spiritual resource. True worship brings people into God's presence. True worship turns our attention to the creator. True worship connects people to God through space and time. True worship strengthens our spiritual confidence in God's power to save. The entire scene before us in these five verses takes place before God's throne. The imagery is intending to tell us what true worship is all about.

The reason we start here is because of where we left off at the end of chapter 13. The land beast used his deceptive power in order that people give worship to the sea beast. Those marked by the beast are caught up in the false worship of the sea beast. We know what false worship looks like. We examined false belief last week. Now, in chapter 14, we turn to what constitutes true worship.

True worship is focused upon God the Father, revealed through Jesus Christ – v. 1

Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

The first thing John sees is Mount Zion. Like every other image in Revelation, this is symbolic. The prophet Joel speaks of Mount Zion as the place of God's salvation. Joel 2:32, ³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. Mount Zion means divine deliverance. Mount Zion was known as the place where the Messiah would reign. Psalm

2:6 tells us, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." Further, Mount Zion embodied that which abides forever. Psalm 125:1 says, Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. Mount Zion is described as the city of God in Hebrews 12:22, But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, Thus these worshippers seen by John are the people of the city of God. This is a deliberate contrast to those who were seen worshipping the beast in chapter 13. This is as we would expect, for Zion is a symbol of Christ's presence with his people throughout history.

Worship is centered upon God and Christ. John sees the Lamb, the true Lamb, not the false imitator whom we encountered in chapter 13. This Lamb is the real deal. We first encountered the Lamb in chapter 5. He took the scroll of the meaning of human history from the hand of God the Father, breaking its seals, interpreting the meaning of life. Next we met the Lamb in chapter 7, between the breaking of the sixth and the final seal. In the interlude we watch God mark those who are his own. They are sealed. The message being that God knows his own. None will be lost. Now, in chapter 14, we see the Lamb again, standing victorious with his followers.

John sees 144,000 who are marked with the name of God the Father and the Lamb. As you recall from when we first encountered this number back in chapter 7, its symbolism is that it represents the full company of God's people. This is the church in totality. The 144,000 are God's people. Note their location in this vision. Back in chapter 7, we encountered the 144,000 on earth, during the interlude between the breaking of the sixth and the seventh seal of the scroll of history. In that image we saw God's people in the midst of the flow of history. History is unfolding with the breaking of the seals. The story of God's people, the church, unfolds in history. However now, in chapter 14, we see the 144,000 on Mount Zion, standing in the heavenly Jerusalem. Whereas before they were in history, now they are in heaven. The story of their faith, their walk with Christ, is complete. To that end, it is important to note that the number has not changed. All 144,000 have made it into God's kingdom, none have been lost. The beast had sought to confuse, deceive and use his powers to claim some, but none are lost. When the roll is called up yonder, all are present and accounted for.

John sees that these 144,000 have the name of the Lamb and the Father written on their foreheads. Let me illustrate what this means. The Greek historian Herodotus tells of the temple of Heracles located at the mouth of the Nile River. This temple had the right of asylum. Imagine you have committed a crime and the authorities are hot on your trail. Or, imagine an accident: your ox broke loose and gored your neighbor and his brothers want your blood. Or, that you are an escaped slave. If you are able to make your way to the temple before being apprehended, then the temple would grant you asylum. You would be branded, tattooed, with a sacred mark of protection. The authority of the temple was such that it would grant you absolute security from those who would seek your harm.

God's people are sealed. They are tattooed with the name of God upon their forehead. That seal, that tattoo, grants them absolute security as they face the trials and

uncertainties of life. They belong to God the Father through the work of the Lamb. His name marks them. Nothing can negate that great truth. All true believers, without exception, are sealed, just as all those who belong to the beast are branded by the beast.

Next, true worship declares the redemption given by God through Christ.

True worship declares the redemption given by God through Christ – v. 2 – 3

² And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³ and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. Ne

Have you ever been to a Billy Graham crusade or Promise Keeper event, an event where there are a lot of people singing? I have been to several Urbana Missions conferences, gathering 17,000 people in the Urbana arena. Hearing 17,000 people sing is a truly impressive and magnificent blessing. We seek to do this in worship each week. We want to fill the space with the sound of praise and the more we fill it, the greater the blessing it is to those who are present. This is what John is getting at when he writes of the roar of waters, thunder and multitude of harpists. God's people are singing God's praise and it fills the senses. Al Seawell regularly reminds me that one day the office of preaching will cease, but God's people will always sing; always offer their worship to the Lamb.

In v. 1 we see that the focus of worship is God and the Lamb, in contrast to the false message of the beasts, in these two verses we see that the content and message of true worship is the anthem of redemption. Interestingly, in v. 2 it appears that the song of redemption is coming from the heavens themselves. But in v. 3 we are told that it is the 144, 000 who sing. This is probably another example of the biblical principle that God acts, we react. V. 3 speaks of *learning* the new song being sung. This is what God's people do in worship: we learn more of the magnificence of what Christ has accomplished and then sing it back to God in praise and thanksgiving.

The choir sings before the four creatures and the twenty-four elders. They sing a *new song*. The image of a *new song* is that of the Old Testament of God's victory over the enemy, a victory given by God. They sing what they know. They have experienced it. This is why no one else can sing it. In order to sing this song, you have to have experienced the redemption offered in Christ. They sing before God, the four living creatures and the angels. They sing about having been "redeemed," that is purchased. They have been separated from evil. They have broken free of false belief.

We have seen that true worship is focused upon God the Father and God the Son. The message and content of worship is the story of redemption. This, by the way, is one reason why following the seasons of the church year is so helpful. The seasons walk us through the story of salvation each year in our observance of worship. As you might expect, John not only tells us what true worship is about, but he also tells us what

true worshippers are about.

True worshippers are:

Focused on Christ – v. 4a

⁴ It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.

The first part of v. 4 has led to much misunderstanding through the centuries. Some have argued that the 144, 000 in this chapter are not *all* the saints of God, but rather elite, super saints, the special-ops forces of the kingdom of heaven. In the Middle Ages this verse was important in promoting celibacy in general and encouraging the establishment of monasteries and convents. Renouncing marriage was viewed as a spiritually superior pathway of life.

This represented a serious mistake, arising from a marriage of Greek philosophy with the biblical text (no pun intended). Some Greek philosophers considered the human body to be corrupt, a nuisance and distraction to the pursuit of a disembodied ideal. But to think that sexual relations *within marriage* are defiling is a Greek idea, not a Hebrew idea.

Genesis 1 tells of the creation of the cosmos. Genesis 2 tells of the creation of Eve and the establishment of marriage. The conclusion of Genesis 2 is just that, a conclusion, as the first word *therefore* indicates: ²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Marriage is woven into creation as God made it. Work with me as I explain an important message given to us from the first two chapters of the Bible. Genesis 1 describes the six days of creation. In verse 1:26 we are told, ²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Note the plural, “let us make...our image...our likeness.” Christian interpreters see this as a reflection of the Trinitarian nature of God. At the end of each day of creation, God looks out upon what he has accomplished and declares that it was good. God is done with his work and he declares that it was very good. God prepares the Garden of Eden, places Adam in it, and we would expect everything to be perfect. But then we read, ¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” The creation was good, even very good, but for Adam, something, or rather, someone, was missing. You know the story: God sends Adam into a sleep and takes the rib, fashioning Eve and then presenting her to Adam as his wife. Upon greeting Eve, Adam speaks the first recorded human sentence in the Bible,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”

Eve is not Adam. She is human, but she is female. He is male. Adam and Eve complement one another. They are not the same. In their married union, Adam and Eve more fully reflect the image of God than Adam did alone. In chapter 1, in the brief

summary affirmation of the creation of man, we are told,

27 So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

It is as male and female, as husband and wife, that we more fully reflect the image of God. Alone, Adam had unity. With Eve, he has both unity and community.

The question still remains, what did John intend in making the reference to virginity in this passage? Repeatedly in the New Testament the church is described as the Bride of Christ. Part of this image is the idea of remaining faithful to her spouse, of not going after other false gods. The image of virginity is meant to imply spiritual purity. Later we will encounter the prostitute Babylon. Babylon is clearly the parody of the church. So I suggest a figurative interpretation. This reference is to those saints who remain loyal to Christ.

True worshippers remain spiritually pure. Secondly, true worshippers follow Christ.

Follow Christ – 4b

It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

A Christian follows Christ. We become what we worship. Those who worship the beast become beastly. Christ's people seek to know Christ and be obedient to him. The imagery is that they keep their eyes on the Lamb. Have you ever watched well trained dogs? A properly trained dog will keep its eye on its master, waiting the sign that will tell the dog what it is supposed to do. Our job, as those who follow the Lamb, is to keep our eyes on Christ, and him alone.

The temptation to take our eyes off of Christ is perpetually present. When I work with a couple to plan their wedding ceremony it is interesting to me how often couples want to add things to the wedding ceremony that are more appropriate for the reception. Couples, especially if they have drunk deeply from the springs of popular American culture, may ask for readings from secular writers Kahil Gilbran or Wendell Berry. Or they may want an excerpt from Margery William's book *The Velveteen Rabbit* – I like *The Velveteen Rabbit*, it is a great children's story, but it does not belong in a service of worship. On more than one occasion I have had a bride say to me, "*Well, is it not my wedding ceremony?*" And they are shocked when I tell them, "*No. It is not your ceremony; it is the church's ceremony.*" This dynamic is true in every area of church life: it is very easy to allow ourselves to be distracted from our first commitments. How often have I heard parents say of youth ministry, "The kids want to have fun." Certainly, having fun is a good thing. But the purpose of the youth ministry is first to train and disciple our young people in the Christian faith. If we focus on fun, we will definitely miss the mark of training our young people in the faith. But if we keep our eye on the task of communicating Christ and his greatness, the fun will fall into its proper place.

True worshippers remain spiritually pure. They follow Christ. Thirdly, they sacrifice for Christ.

Sacrifice for Christ – 4c

These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb,

Firstfruits was a particular type of sacrifice from Old Testament days. A Firstfruits offering would occur when the crops first began to mature. The farmer would take some of the earliest fruits and vegetables and give them to the priests or temple as his Firstfruits offering. The idea is to give to God first. It was largely symbolic, but in giving the Firstfruits the farmer was then free to enjoy and dispose the rest of the harvest as he saw fit.

As God's people, we do not contribute in any way to the sacrifice of Christ. His sacrifice is perfect and complete. Its merit is infinite. God does not need us to contribute our part. He is not going to run out of resources if we do not add our bit. Rather, the New Testament concept of the believer's sacrifice is the sacrifice of praise. Our task is to pray, to be grateful, to lift up holy hands declaring the greatness, majesty and worth of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we gather for worship on Sunday mornings at Fairview Presbyterian Church we are offering God the firstfruits of our praise and adoration.

True worshippers are spiritually pure. They remain steadfastly focused on Christ; they offer the sacrifice of prayer. And finally, they speak the truth of Christ.

Speak the truth of Christ – 5

⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

On Tuesday Americans will vote in the midterm elections. Very little truth is declared in most of the advertisements and claims in an election season. The candidates are focused on saying what they think will get themselves elected or re-elected. There is little interest in truth, in measured claims, and honest self assessment. Instead we get polling data, spin, half truths and accusations.

Christians are to be men and women committed to the pursuit of truth. Those who follow the beast are not committed to truth. Paul writes in Romans 1:25, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. Those who serve and worship the beast have exchanged the truth of God for false belief. True worshippers seek to speak the truth. Remember that the context of this passage is our theme of worship. The truthfulness referenced here is primarily theological truthfulness. The church should be a place where no falsehoods are spoken, a place where integrity is the goal.

Close

This afternoon, the teams of the NFL will meet and compete. Games will be won or lost and the standings of the teams will be accordingly adjusted. On Monday morning most of you will return to your work and begin pursuing the tasks of your business, occupation or career. On Tuesday America will vote and the political landscape will change. Things are happening in most of the arenas of life.

Consider that every week I welcome you to the *most important hour of your week* and yet, in worship, nothing ever happens. In work, you produce something or sell something. On the football field you score points and win or lose the game. In politics you get voted in or out of office. What do we do in worship? We read responsively. We say prayers. We sing songs. We listen to a sermon. Nothing is accomplished in worship. We Presbyterians speak about *The Great Ends of the Church*, one of which is, *the maintenance of divine worship*. Not the *progress* of worship, the *advancement* of worship, or the *completion* of worship, but the *maintenance*.

And yet, the non-action of worship is the very stuff the Lamb of God has called us to do. Church history is a very messy affair. And yet, somehow, through it all, worship is the spiritual resource that the Lamb uses to advance his kingdom and bring glory to God the Father.

Say "Amen" Somebody.

The Lamb and the 144,000

14 Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³ and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴ It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.