

# ♪ Worship Notes ♪

Volume 4, Number 8 ♪ September 2009

## THEME: Worship in Hebrews

### LET US DRAW NEAR

*Worship in the Letter to the Hebrews*

*“There is, indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, which so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which He offered by His death, which so abundantly deals with the issue of ceremonies as well as their abrogation, and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law. Let us therefore not allow the Church of God or ourselves to be deprived of so great a benefit, but firmly defend the possession of it.” (John Calvin, Commentary on Hebrews)*

### A BETTER WAY

It is commonly held that the Letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who because of persecution or the threat of it were in danger of returning to Judaism. The writer gives a resounding defense of the superiority of Christ and of the New Covenant he instituted, with the clearly implied question: “Why would you give all of this up for a superseded system which was just a shadow of the reality that has now come?” Here is a list of all the things of which the writer says that a better counterpart now exists under Christ:

#### **BETTER:**

|           |                                   |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| 1:2-14    | spokesman for God (the Son)       |
| 2:2-3     | message (salvation)               |
| 3:3       | rest                              |
| 4:15      | High Priest (tempted but sinless) |
| 7:7,15-17 | priestly order (of Melchizedek)   |
| 7:21      | priesthood (made with oath)       |

|                |                              |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| 7:22           | covenant (better guarantor)  |
| 7:27; 9:26     | sacrifice (priest Himself)   |
| 7:28           | priest (perfect)             |
| 8:2; 9:11      | tabernacle                   |
| 8:6            | ministry (better covenant)   |
| 8:6            | covenant (better promises)   |
| 8:6            | promises                     |
| 8:11           | knowledge of the Lord        |
| 9:12; 12:24    | blood                        |
| 9:12           | redemption (eternal)         |
| 9:14; 10:22    | cleansing (of conscience)    |
| 9:14-15        | inheritance (eternal)        |
| 9:23           | sacrifices                   |
| 9:24           | holy place (in heaven)       |
| 9:26; 10:12,14 | frequency (once for all)     |
| 8:10; 10:16    | law (written on heart, mind) |
| 8:19           | access (to holy place)       |
| 12:22          | mountain/city (Zion)         |
| 12:28          | kingdom (cannot be shaken)   |
| 13:9           | food (grace)                 |
| 13:10          | altar (Christ)               |

### A BETTER MEDIATOR

Above all, of course, the writer stunningly portrays the Person of Christ as a vastly superior Mediator and Priest than was offered by the Old Covenant. And he is powerfully portrayed in both his deity and his humanity, as seen especially in chapters 1 and 2:

#### **TWO NATURES & ROLES (1-2)**

1. *Worship of the Son*
  - a. His deity (1:1-4)
  - b. His authority (1:5-14)

As God's ultimate spokesman and representative (1:1-3,5), Christ is seen to be superior to the angels (1:4-7) and indeed deserving of worship himself (1:6).

## 2. *Worship by the Son*

- a. His humanity (2:6-11)
- b. His priesthood (2:12-18; also 4:14-16)

As one of us, the incarnate Son exercise a priestly ministry on our behalf as our Substitute (2:9,14-15,17) and indeed (post-Ascension) as the Mediator of our praise: he is our great Worship Leader (2:12b).<sup>1</sup>

## 3. *Summary* (3:1) APOSTLE and HIGH PRIEST

Here the writer summarizes Christ's dual, bi-directional role: first as *Apostle*, as the Mediator of between God and man and the conduit of God's message to man (2:12a); and as *Priest*, as the Mediator between man and God and the conduit of man's response back to God (2:12b).

### **TWO PRIESTHOODS (5-10)**

The author extensively develops the theme of Christ's priesthood and its distinctive differences from the Levitical priesthood under the Old Covenant.

## 1. *Levitical Priesthood/Order of Aaron*

- a. weak, imperfect, sinful (7:27,28 | 7:16,26,28)
- b. mortal, therefore temporary (7:3,16,23 | 7:24-25; 10:12,14)
- c. served a copy and shadow (8:5 | 8:2; 9:11-12,24)

<sup>1</sup> For more on this subject, please see [Worship Notes 1.8 \(August 2006\)](#); my [online articles](#) "Jesus Our Worship Leader" and "Proclamation and Praise;" and my book *Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* Wipf & Stock, 2007).

- d. had to sacrifice for self too (9:7 | 7:27; 9:14)
- e. repeated sacrifices (7:27; 9:25; 10:3,11 | 7:27; 9:12,25,28; 10:12,14,18)
- f. no cleansing of conscience or making perfect (7:11; 9:9-10; 10:1-4 | 9:14; 10:10,14)
- g. offered blood of bulls and goats (9:12,13,25 | 9:12,26; 10:12)

## 2. *Priesthood of Christ/Order of Melchizedek*

- a. Christ like Melchizedek
  - 1) "king of Salem" (7:1); "king of righteousness" (7:2); without human pedigree (7:3,6); greater than Abraham and Levi (7:6-10); not from priestly line (7:11-16; 8:4)
  - 2) Genesis 14:18-20 Melchizedek as mediator; notice the bi-directional nature of Melchizedek's actions:
    - a) blesses Abraham on behalf of God ↓
    - b) blesses God on behalf of Abraham ↑
- b. Entering the heavenly tabernacle (His sacrifice) (9:11-14,24; 10:5-9)
- c. Ministering in the heavenly tabernacle (His session and ongoing ministry) (8:1-2, etc.)

## 3. *Summary* (10:11-14)

## **A BETTER WORSHIP (10:19-22)**

The author climatically makes application in these verses: in light of all the ways in which Christ and the New Covenant have been shown to be infinitely superior to the old system ("Therefore," 10:19), the logical response is to "**draw near** in full assurance of faith" (10:22). The Greek word translated "draw near" is used several times in the book (4:16; 7:25; 10:1,22; 11:6;

The invitation of the book of Hebrews is to go where Christ goes (into the Father's presence)

(Cocksworth)

12:18,22; see also 1 Pet 2:4-5). It was a common Old Testament word for the approach of worship by the priests; but now of course it has a deeper and richer significance, as the approach is to God in heaven, and by all believers.

Full access has been *obtained* through the *past* work of Christ (10:19b-20) work of Christ (10:21: since we *have* a great priest over the house of God"). Thus the writer highlights these two emphases of Christ's past and present work as the ground of our confident and sure (10:19-22) access to the presence of the Father: not only has Christ opened and shown us the way; but he *takes us with him*. Both the past and present aspects of Christ's work are quite prominent through the book (though his present work, even though so crucial, is often overlooked):

| <u>Past</u> | <u>Present</u> |
|-------------|----------------|
| 1:3         |                |
| 2:9-10      |                |
|             | 2:12           |
| 2:14-17     |                |
|             | 2:18           |
| 3:1         |                |
|             | 3:1            |
| 4:14-17     |                |
|             | 4:18           |
| 5:7-8       |                |
|             | 7:25           |
| 7:26-27     |                |
|             | 8:1-2          |
|             | 8:6            |
| 9:11-14     |                |
| 9:23        |                |
|             | 9:24           |
| 9:26        |                |
| 10:10       |                |
| 10:12-14    |                |
| 10:19-20    |                |
|             | 10:21          |
| 12:2        |                |
| 12:24       |                |
| 13:12       |                |
|             | 13:15          |
| 13:20       |                |
|             | 13:21          |

The fitting responses to all that the Person and work of Christ have made available to us are indicated by the writer to be confidence and assurance (10:22; 4:16); gratitude, reverence, awe (12:28); and praise (13:15).

## CONCLUSION: “*through Him*”

(13:15; 7:25)

(2 Cor 1:20; Ephes 2:18; Col 3:17)

At the end of the epistle the writer emphasizes once more that our response to God is always mediated by Christ, the all-sufficient Priest, Mediator, and Leader of our worship:

“***Through him***, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.”

Christ is not  
only the Com-  
panion, but  
also the  
Ferryman

(Martin Luther)

## QUOTABLES

### *Worship in Hebrews*

“The overriding thrust of the book [Hebrews] . . . is about how Christ leads us into the holy presence of God.”

(Christopher Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, 75)

“[Christ] fulfilled the figure and took away the shadow.”

(Martin Luther, *Commentary on Hebrews*, on 10:19)

“Although the critical point in Jesus’ ministry comes at the cross, the climatic point, as far as Hebrews is concerned, happens at the ascension. For Hebrews the ascension is the great liturgical moment for humanity. It is the pinnacle of Christ’s redemptive work because a human being enters the heavenly place of God’s presence and sits at his right hand.”

(Christopher Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, 157)

“The Christology of Hebrews undoes forever all earthly notions of priesthood and mediation.”

(Noel Due, *Created For Worship*, 181)

“The whole burden of the Epistle [Hebrews] can, accordingly, be epitomized in two resounding exoments: we have a high priest, we have an altar: sanctuary and sacrifice are ours: 8:1, 13:16. The tenor of this writer’s argument, as against the pressure to revert to Judaism, is that Christians are the people who possess the real thing; to relapse would not be to regain the system they had lost; it would be to exchange substance for shadow.”

(C. F. D. Moule, “Sanctuary and Sacrifice in

the Church of the New Testament,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 1 [1950]: 37)

“Christ is the One in whom Word and response are united [Hebrews 2:12].”

(William Nicholls, *Jacob’s Ladder: The Meaning of Worship*, 40)

“Hebrews presents the most complete and fully integrated theology of worship in the New Testament. All the important categories of Old Testament thinking on this subject—sanctuary, sacrifice, altar, priesthood and covenant—are taken up and related to the person and work of Jesus Christ. More than any other New Testament document, Hebrews makes it clear that the inauguration of the new covenant by Jesus means the fulfillment and replacement of the whole pattern of approach to God established under the Mosaic covenant. The writer proclaims the end of that earthly cult, by expounding Christ’s work as the ultimate, heavenly cult. “In short, then, if we take Christ out of Hebrews, we are left with nothing. He is the substance of the book and without him the whole reality of the new covenant and the life of Christian belief and worship collapses. The writer, then, does not spare his readers the glory of Christ’s person and work nor the demands this places upon them. There is no ‘laid back religion’ in Hebrews. The author expects his addressees to attend to what is being said with diligence and urgency. The change of worship brought about through Christ is irreversible, and its consequences are inevitably pressing.”

(Noel Due, *Created For Worship*, 156)

“Hebrews seems to reflect a . . . reaction against the ritualistic worship of the old covenant. That was all only a mere shadow of the reality which Jesus has made possible for his followers the immediate and direct entry into the heavenly tabernacle, the very presence of God (10.1). Here too worship is conceived in somewhat pietistic terms: where all priesthood and ministry focuses on Jesus each member of the community is dependent only on him for the reality of renewal in worship (4.16; 6.19f.; 13.15).”

(James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 131-32)

“The essence of faith in the NT is faith despite the scandal of [Christ’s] humanity. We shall see that it is just those New Testament writings which most strongly emphasize the deity of Christ which also take his humanity most seriously. Thus we find precisely in Hebrews the boldest of all assertions of Christ’s deity: it could not be asserted more strongly than in Hebrews 1:10, in which the Son is addressed directly as Creator of heaven and earth.”

(Oscar Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, 98)

“The ministry of Christ—past, present and future—is portrayed in Hebrews as the only basis on which we can relate to God and offer him acceptable worship.”

(David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 228)

“In Christ the ‘Hebrews’ have a ‘great high priest’ (4:14), and as those who have fled to take hold of God’s proffered hope they have this hope as an anchor to the soul (6:19). In 8:1 it is again asserted that they have a high priest, now described as ‘seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.’ According to 10:19 they have confidence ‘to enter the sanctuary’ by which is meant the objective right of access—on the basis of Christ’s self offering, while in 10:34

they have something better and more durable than the temporal belongings lost because they had been victimised as Christians. Even 12:1, in saying that they have a great cloud of witnesses surrounding them . . . may be said to contribute to the theme. The final statement as to what the ‘addressees’ have calls for special attention, because it not only claims that they ‘have an altar’ but also asserts that access to this altar is denied those who ‘officiate at the tent’ (13:10). Having made this much of the idea of possession, and even of non-possession, the author makes a final assertion that explains the need for the others, namely that in this world Christians do not have a ‘lasting city’ (13:14).

“As Christ ascends to minister in the heavenly sanctuary he carries our names on his heart before the presence of God just as surely as he bore them in his priestly sacrifice on the cross. Furthermore, he comes before the holiest presence of God as ‘the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’ (12:2), or as Luther put it in his commentary on Hebrews, ‘the ferryman’ ready to take us with him. The invitation of the book of Hebrews is to go where he goes.”

(Christopher Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, 157)

“The fact that Jesus Christ is the leader of our worship, the high priest who forgives us our sins and leads us into the holy presence of the Father, is the central theme of the epistle to the Hebrews.”

(James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 57)

“It is mainly to St. Paul that we turn for our understanding of the priesthood of the Church, and mainly to the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews that we turn for our understanding of the High Priesthood of Christ.”

(T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 10)

“[The author] points out that Christ not only gave an example by crossing over, but that He also holds out His hand to those who follow. Therefore he says that we “have confidence to enter,” for He Himself opened this way for us (Heb. 10:20) and at the same time is for us the Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15) and is able to help those who are tempted (Heb. 2:18). For this reason we have no excuse for delaying, since He certainly cannot do more for us than He is doing. For while others can teach and exhort to cross over, this Christ alone is not only the Companion but also the One who leads the way, not only the Leader but also the Helper, yes, the Ferryman, as we read in Deut. 32:11: ‘As an eagle incites its nestlings forth by hovering over its brood, so He spread His wings to receive them and bore them up on His pinions.’ For he who relies on Christ through faith is carried on the shoulders of Christ. (Luther, *Commentary on Hebrews*, on Hebrews 10:19)

“Hebrews has the theme of worship at its core because it has the person and work of Jesus Christ at its heart. He is the one who is shown to be both the offerer of perfect worship to God, and the one through whom God may be worshipped by his people.” (Noel Due, *Created For Worship*, 154)

“The overriding thrust of the book which is about how Christ leads us into the holy presence of God. The framework of the letter is a comparison between Jewish liturgical practices and Christian experience of worship. Hebrews takes the imagery of the temple and the sacrificial ministry of its priests and describes them as a shadow of the reality which has come in Christ.” (Christopher Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, 75)

“Jesus is shown to have gained access to the

only sacred space worth having—heaven. That space is superior to any previously gained through entry into the promised land or into the inner sanctum of the cult place. Trusting in this, his readers should not hanker after the lost Jerusalem.”

(M. E. Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 67)

“The epistle treats of a twofold priesthood. The former priesthood was a material one, with material adornment, tabernacle, sacrifices and with pardon couched in ritual; material were all its appointments. The new order is a spiritual priesthood, with spiritual adornments, spiritual tabernacle and sacrifices—spiritual in all that pertains to it.” (Martin Luther, “Christ Our Great High Priest” [sermon])

“The epistle to the Hebrews contrasts two forms of worship: true worship, which means reposing on and participating in the self-offering of Christ who alone can lead us into “the Holy of Holies”—the holy presence of the Father—and false worship, with its false reliance on what we do by following our own devices or traditions. In other words, when we take our eyes off Jesus Christ and that worship and offering which God has provided for us in Christ, which alone is acceptable to him, we fall back on our ‘religion.’”

(James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 59)

“Hebrews will not let us replace the mediation of Christ with the mediation of the worship leader who is able to engender an affective response, which is then interpreted as direct communion with God.”

(Noel Due, *Created For Worship*, 181)

“Christ is the essence of worship, and our understanding of the Church’s worship must take its starting point from Him. In Him is embodied the downward movement of God’s love and grace, as He reveals Himself to man, and reconciles man to Himself; and also the upward movement of man’s response, perfectly dependent upon that love, and drawing from it all the resources of strength which are needed to make that response in all circumstances of life, and even in death itself.”

(William Nicholls, *Jacob’s Ladder: The Meaning of Worship*, 26)

“The Old ‘Covenant’ was essentially valid. It had been appointed by God. But it had been essentially provisional, imperfect, prophetic and transitory. The Jews under the Law had possessed only ‘a shadow of the good things to come,’ and ‘not the very image of the things’ [10:1]. The Law had ‘made nothing perfect’ [7:19]. Its sanctuary—for ‘even the first covenant’ had possessed ‘ordinances of divine service’—had been only ‘a sanctuary of this world’ [9:1]. Its priests—or there had been priests too under the Old Covenant—were mere erring and fallible men [5:2ff.; 7:27; 9:7]. Its sacrifices, continually repeated [10:1ff.], had been mere sacrifices of beasts, ‘bulls and goats,’ whose blood could not possibly take away sins [10:4]. In all these respects the New Covenant was ‘better’ [8:6]. It was alone final and adequate. It was that, moreover, to which the ordinances of the Old Covenant—‘carnal ordinances,’ imposed only ‘until a time of reformation’ [9:10]—had all along been prophetically pointing. The Old Testament law had been truly appointed by God, but not meant to be final. It was ‘a parable for the time now present [9:9], and in its literal significance it belonged to the past. ‘The priesthood being changed’—and it is the cardinal doctrine of the Epistle that there has been a change of the priesthood, ‘there is made of necessity a change also of the law’ [7:12]. The writer of Hebrews in effect may be said to have done for the Law upon its sacrificial side—that is to say, as a divinely-

enjoined system of worship—what St. Paul had done for the Law as a system of injunctions and commands regulating everyday life: he has at once powerfully vindicated its place in the Old Testament, and at the same time provided a theoretical justification of the fact that it had been in practice abandoned by exhibiting its fulfilment in Christ.”

(A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ*, 178-79)

“Hebrews . . . considers also the present lordship of Christ as a high priestly Office. As a result of this conception of the High Priest, the author connects as closely as possible Christ’s present work and His once-for-all act. ‘Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’ (7:25). This quite clearly indicates a high priestly office which Christ continues to fulfil in the present since his resurrection, and *eis to pavteles* (throughout all time).”

(Oscar Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, 101-2)

“In the argument of Hebrews, sanctuary, sacrifice, altar and priesthood all find their fulfilment in the saving work of Jesus Christ, not in some ongoing activity in the Christian congregation. When Christians throughout the ages have failed to grasp this teaching and its implications, clergy, buildings and objects within those buildings have been invested with a special sanctity. This has obscured the true focus of the New Testament, leading to a preoccupation with ritual and ceremony, wrong views about Christian ministry and a simplistic application of Old Testament texts to what goes on in church. More fundamentally, people are misled about the way we can relate to God and please him when Christianity is presented as an earthly cult.”

(David Peterson, “Worship in the New Testament,” in D. A. Carson, ed., *Worship: Adoration and Action*, 71)

“When we turn to the Epistles of the New Testament for the theology of Christ’s priestly ministry, we find two main emphases which very clearly correspond to the two main aspects of priesthood adumbrated in the Old Testament and fulfilled so wonderfully in Christ Himself: the mediation of God’s Word, and liturgical witness to it, and overarching both, as in the Gospels, the concept of the Messianic Kingdom. This dual aspect is most evident in the Epistles of St. Paul, on the one hand, which are concerned mainly with atonement in terms of justification and expiation before the Word or Law of God, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews, on the other hand, which is most concerned with atonement in terms of Christ’s high-priestly oblation of Himself and His heavenly Intercession. The difference between these two, however, is not one of contrariety but of emphasis. They imply each other and they are correlative to each other. A New Testament doctrine of the Priesthood of Christ and His sacrifice rests upon that twin foundation.”

(T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 9-10)

“Risen and ascended the Son for ever glorifies the Father; and in this glorifying (which was from all eternity) the human nature, assumed in the Incarnation, now shares. The Johannine doctrine of the glorifying assists our understanding of the conception in the Epistle to

the Hebrews of Christ as our great high-priest. Christ’s priesthood belongs, as does His sonship, to the eternal world: forever Son, He is also forever priest. Priesthood means offering, and in the Son there is for ever that spirit of self-offering which the sacrifice of Calvary uniquely disclosed in our world of sin and death. The sacrifice of Calvary has been wrought once for all; but now Christ as high-priest ‘ever liveth to make intercession’ for ‘them that draw near unto God through him’ (Heb. vii, 25), and has entered ‘into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God for us’ (Heb. ix, 24). Though Calvary can never be repeated, Christ is for ever with the Father in that character of self-giving and self-offering of which Calvary was the decisive historical utterance.”

(Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, 94)

**ALSO CHECK OUT:**

QUOTABLES: Worship & more  
words of doxological wisdom

[worr.wordpress.com](http://worr.wordpress.com)

## COMING NEXT MONTH:

### Song in Scripture



**WORSHIP NOTES** is a free monthly online digest of reflections, views, news and reviews concerning biblical worship. It is produced by Ron Man as a publication of **Worship Resources International**, a ministry devoted to “strengthening the body of Christ in the U.S. and around the world by promoting the priority, understanding and practice of God-centered, Christ-exalting, Biblically-based worship.” To subscribe, please go to [www.worr.org](http://www.worr.org) and click on “Worship Notes” at the top. There are many other free resources on the website also.