

# **The Forgotten Sanctuary**

## **Why is Hebrews 8:2 Part of “The Main Point”?**

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## Introduction

I love Free Grace. I was raised in a Free Grace home. I went to Florida Bible College, a Free Grace school, as many of you know. I graduated from Chafer Theological Seminary, where the school and every faculty member in it was Free Grace. Grace Chapel, which I attended during that time, and which ordained me, is Free Grace. I have taught Free Grace students around the country and on the other side of the world. I have been ministering in my present pulpit for almost six years, and every member of the church, every last one, is also Free Grace. I am neither a Calvinist nor an Arminian, and I wish Free Grace had its own set of points so I could affirm them all.<sup>1</sup> Until then, consider me an *n*-point Free Grace man, where *n* is however many points we have. I have never been anything *but* Free Grace, my whole life long. I remain, to this day, a firm adherent of the Free Grace gospel, without the faintest shadow of a sliver of a doubt.

I tell you all this because I am going to speak to a flaw in the Free Grace movement, and as I do that, I want you to know two things. First, I am your friend. I am your ally. I am doing my best to help you. Second, I have enough experience to know what I'm talking about. You might disagree with me, and I might be wrong, but don't tell yourself that if only I had a little experience I'd know better. If we disagree here, it's going to run deeper than that.

I'm up here to speak about Hebrews 8:1-2, which is the main point of the book; the author directly says so.<sup>2</sup> As we come to understand how this is the main point of the book, a certain picture of worship will emerge. In contemplating that picture of worship, and asking ourselves how it applies, two key applications will appear. One of them has to do with how we behave in church on Sunday morning, and I'll talk about that more at the end. It may be controversial, but not in a way that's apt to make anyone angry. The other has to do with how we relate to other believers and other churches, and it cuts a lot closer to the bone, so fair warning is in order, and here it is. As we come to understand the biblical picture of worship, we will see that our conception of Christian unity is deeply flawed, and this means that we sometimes try to create unity where none exists, and at other times we create divisions where none should exist. As Bob put it in a recent Grace in Focus article, "Paul warns in Galatians that we must beware of biting and devouring one another (Gal 5:15). It seems to me that this is what has been

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Andrew actually did present such a set of points, complete with acronym, at the 2001 National Teaching Pastors' Conference. His acronym was PROPER, as follows:

**P**re-eminent grace  
**R**esponsible agency  
**O**ntological freedom  
**P**assive faith  
**E**ternal security  
**R**ewards for obedience

<sup>2</sup> Some argue that 8:1-2 is the main point of *this section* of the book. In effect, though, this amounts to the same thing, because the book has a 'spiral' structure to it. Every section of the book makes the same points—the argument just gets more detailed and more nuanced as the book progresses. If this is the main point of this section, then it's one way of stating the main point of the book as a whole. But in reality, all the varied strands of the whole book come together in 8:1-2; understand these two verses and the book comes together as a powerfully unified whole.

happening in Free Grace circles over the past few years.”<sup>3</sup> I agree. Of course that is a generalization; I understand that these things are not true of *every* last member of our movement. Nonetheless, I contend that the generalization is true in the way that generalizations can be, and if you’ll stick with me for the next few minutes, I hope to show the truth of it, and also point us toward the way of escape from this temptation to which we have surrendered for so long. Please don’t interpret anything I say here as a veiled shot at someone in particular. If the shoe fits, fine, but I don’t have a list of names or anything. I’m after something much bigger than any single disagreement: how we as a movement relate to controversy generally.

I want to begin by planting the question in the back of your minds: What is the basis for Christian unity? Many of us behave as though our basis for unity is common agreement on a doctrinal statement, and some of us would be willing to say so out loud. I will argue that the book of Hebrews points us to a different answer, an answer that has very serious implications for how we conduct ourselves toward other Christians that do not believe as we do on certain things—even on issues as central as aspects of the gospel itself. Moreover, this application does not arise from some poorly-understood clause buried in an obscure verse; it arises from the main point of the book. Let’s go to Hebrews 8 and take a look.

### **The Main Point of Hebrews**

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle which the Lord set up, and not man.<sup>4</sup>

Most expositions of Hebrews do not treat the entirety of the author’s main point as the main point. The main point, they will say, is to encourage beleaguered Jewish Christians to stick with Jesus their High Priest and not go back to Old Covenant Judaism. To this end, Hebrews argues that Jesus is better than angels, Moses, Aaron, and Wonder Bread, and how dare they forsake Jesus!

All of this is true as far as it goes. But the main point is much bigger than that. Most people readily understand the place of 8:1 in the book—the superiority of Jesus as High Priest. The significance of the heavenly sanctuary, however, often escapes interpreters, and that will be the focus of this paper.

### **Jesus the Superior Priest...**

Of course, the argument does begin with the superiority of Jesus. He is the superior revealer,<sup>5</sup> become better than the angels by divine appointment as the royal Son and heir to an everlasting throne.<sup>6</sup> As Man *par excellence*, He is crowned with glory and honor, and in due time all things will be placed under His feet.<sup>7</sup> Therefore He is the captain of our salvation, who, being *the* Son of the Father, is not ashamed

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<sup>3</sup> Wilkin, “Five Current Confusions Concerning the Gospel” *Grace in Focus* 25 (March/April 2010) 2

<sup>4</sup> Heb. 8:1-2

<sup>5</sup> Heb. 1:1-4

<sup>6</sup> Heb. 1:5-14

<sup>7</sup> Heb. 2:5-9

to call us brothers who are also sons of that same Father.<sup>8</sup> And since we are flesh and blood, He also shared in our estate in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful High Priest, able to help us in our temptations.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus was faithful to God just as Moses was faithful, but Jesus is the Son, and Moses only a servant.<sup>10</sup> Therefore we are sternly warned not to be like those who did not hear Moses because of their unbelief. If they died disobeying God's servant, what will happen to us if we disobey God's Son?<sup>11</sup> Rather, we are commanded to enter into God's rest through faith.<sup>12</sup> Since we can conceal nothing from God, we need the assistance of our High Priest, and we must come to the throne to obtain help and mercy. This we can do boldly, because He is sympathetic with our weaknesses.<sup>13</sup>

A high priest must be drawn from among the people so that he can be sympathetic to them, and no one can simply promote himself to such an office; he must be selected by God, as Aaron was.<sup>14</sup> So Jesus was selected, a priest after the pattern of Melchizedek.<sup>15</sup> Hebrews will have much to say on this topic, though the original audience had grown slack and would have difficulty understanding it.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the author chooses to leave behind a discussion of the basics, because if someone in his audience is really willing to return to the crowd that screamed "Give us Barabbas"—to crucify Jesus all over again, as it were—then he is beyond the reach of this author.<sup>17</sup> But the author is confident that his audience will do better, that through faith and patience they will inherit the promise which God gave.<sup>18</sup> He confirmed this promise with an oath, in order to console us as we lay hold on the hope He gave us—which hope anchors our souls and enters behind the veil, where Jesus our High Priest has entered as our forerunner. He is able to do this because He is a priest after the pattern of Melchizedek.<sup>19</sup>

Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, and therefore than Levi and Aaron, so his priesthood is greater as well.<sup>20</sup> And this is God's promise, confirmed with an oath, that anchors our souls: "Yahweh has sworn and will not relent: You are a priest forever after the pattern of Melchizedek."<sup>21</sup> The bare fact that this promise was given in Psalm 110 attests to the inferiority of the Aaronic priesthood. That Yahweh gives the promise to *Jesus*, of the tribe of Judah, requires a change of law, because Torah only supports the Levitical priesthood.<sup>22</sup> By this promise, which anchors our souls, Jesus became the surety of a better

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<sup>8</sup> Heb. 2:10-13. One could add that we are not only brothers, but also partakers of the Triune fellowship—see Jn. 17:22-23—but that's another paper.

<sup>9</sup> Heb. 2:14-18

<sup>10</sup> Heb. 3:1-6

<sup>11</sup> Heb. 3:7-19

<sup>12</sup> Heb. 4:1-10

<sup>13</sup> Heb. 4:11-16

<sup>14</sup> Heb. 5:1-4

<sup>15</sup> Heb. 5:5-10

<sup>16</sup> Heb. 5:11-14

<sup>17</sup> Heb. 6:1-8

<sup>18</sup> Heb. 6:9-12

<sup>19</sup> Heb. 6:13-20

<sup>20</sup> Heb. 7:1-10

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 110:4//Heb. 5:6, 7:17, 7:21. Notice how the author reserves "The LORD has sworn..." until the last quote.

<sup>22</sup> Heb. 7:11-19

covenant.<sup>23</sup> Because he offered one sacrifice forever, He need not offer sacrifices again, and because He always lives to intercede for us, He saves us to the uttermost through His unchangeable priesthood.<sup>24</sup>

Which brings us to the main point: “We have such a High Priest, seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected and not man.”

At this point let’s return to the question, “What is the basis for our unity?” From the vantage that the first half of Hebrews provides, we can now see that we are asking the wrong question entirely. The basis for our unity is not a *what* but a *who*. We are unified because we have God as our Father, and therefore we are all brothers. We are unified because we have Jesus as our Brother, the captain of our salvation, and our High Priest. But to *really* grasp how deep this unity runs, we need to grasp the importance of *where* Jesus ministers as our High Priest.

### **...Ministering in the Superior Sanctuary**

At one level, it’s obvious why the place of Jesus’ High Priestly ministry matters so much: just as a priest needs a divine appointment, a covenant to administer and a sacrifice to offer, he needs a place in which to present the blood of the sacrifice. Of course, on earth Jesus could not do this in the sanctuary, as we’ve already seen—He’s from the wrong tribe.

Had that first covenant been faultless, there would have been no need for a second—but it wasn’t, and the Old Covenant documents gave ceaseless testimony to this fact.<sup>25</sup> And, as we have already seen, Jesus is a minister of a *better* covenant and is a priest according to a *superior* priesthood. Fittingly, He has also ministered in a *better* sanctuary.

### **Features of the Heavenly Sanctuary**

What, then, is this better sanctuary like, and what is its service like? We get our first clue from Exodus, which teaches us that the earthly sanctuary was but a copy of the heavenly sanctuary. God showed Moses the heavenly sanctuary on the mountain, and Moses made the earthly tabernacle according to that pattern.<sup>26</sup>

### **Like the Earthly...**

The earthly tabernacle proper was divided into two parts, the first holding the lampstand and such, the second holding the Ark of the Covenant, and above it the mercy seat overshadowed by glorious cherubim.<sup>27</sup> “Of these things,” says the author of Hebrews, “we cannot now speak in detail”—which is an invitation if there ever was one. We *should* know the details, and that’s why they are painstakingly

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<sup>23</sup> Heb. 7:20-22, cf. 6:17-20

<sup>24</sup> Heb. 7:23-28

<sup>25</sup> Heb. 8:7-13

<sup>26</sup> Ex. 25:40//Heb. 8:5

<sup>27</sup> Heb. 9:1-5

recorded for us in the Torah. If we want to know what the heavenly sanctuary looks like, the copy Moses made will give us an idea.

The service of the Mosaic tabernacle, says the author, was always meant to communicate its own transitory nature. No offering at the earthly tabernacle lasted, and another offering would in due course be required. That was the Holy Spirit's testimony<sup>28</sup> that God would one day reveal another, permanent way.<sup>29</sup>

### **...but Better**

Notice the word "even" in 9:1. *Even* the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. That's not the way to start the sentence if the conclusion is "...but now we don't need that stuff anymore." The sentence starts "*Even* the first covenant had these things" because the conclusion will be "and the second does them even better."

Verses 2-10 touch on the high points of the sanctuary and service of the first covenant, and then the author launches us into the second. Christ came, he says, with the greater and more perfect Tabernacle not made with hands, and he brought His own blood, not merely the blood of bulls and goats. In this manner Christ obtained *eternal* redemption.<sup>30</sup>

### **Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary**

Almost all things are purified with blood. If the earthly sanctuary and its instruments and vessels—which were only copies of the true—were purified with the blood of calves and goats, then the better sanctuary must be purified with something better.<sup>31</sup>

### **Christ's Initial Entrance and Present Ministry**

Therefore Christ entered into heaven itself, the true sanctuary which Moses saw and copied. He brought the last sacrifice—His own blood—and by so doing He bore the sin of many.<sup>32</sup> He entered as our forerunner,<sup>33</sup> and purified both the sanctuary itself and us,<sup>34</sup> who minister there with Him.<sup>35</sup>

Since His one sacrifice cleanses us forever, Christ's continuing ministry is not a ministry of sacrifice like the Levitical priesthood was.<sup>36</sup> It is a ministry of intercession as our continuing High Priest.<sup>37</sup> We come

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<sup>28</sup> This is an important hermeneutical point. Here Hebrews tells us that a believing Jew who read the Torah correctly would know—on the basis of Torah alone—that the Levitical offerings were always meant to be temporary. This, Hebrews tells us, is the message the Holy Spirit was conveying *then*.

<sup>29</sup> Heb. 9:6-10

<sup>30</sup> Heb. 9:11-15

<sup>31</sup> Heb. 9:16-10:10

<sup>32</sup> Heb. 9:11-12, 10:11-18

<sup>33</sup> Heb. 6:19-20

<sup>34</sup> Heb. 9:14,23, 10:22

<sup>35</sup> Heb. 10:19-25, 12:22-24

<sup>36</sup> Heb. 10:11-18

<sup>37</sup> Heb. 7:25

boldly to the throne to find grace and help when we need it because He is sympathetic to our weaknesses, having been made like us in all things.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, if a man belongs to Christ, he can come boldly before the throne, and Christ will give him mercy and help in time of need. In a very basic and very important sense, two people who both do this are unified. There is no heavenly Jim Crow arrangement where the Free Grace folks come to one throne of grace, and everybody else has to go to a “separate but equal” throne of grace next door. There is *one* throne, and we who come before it are *one* people, who all receive God’s mercy when we need it.

### **Believers’ Ministry**

But we do not come before the throne only to ask for help.

We cannot go back to the days of the Old Covenant. The cross supersedes the temporary sacrifices and offerings, and Christ perfects us forever. There is no more sacrifice for sin; there is nothing in Jerusalem for us any longer.<sup>39</sup> And there is something else we have to do:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching.<sup>40</sup>

It is our duty as God’s people to draw near to God; this has always been the case.<sup>41</sup> We do this as God’s people have always done, by going to the place where it is possible, that is, to the place where God is. Having been washed in baptism and purified with Christ’s blood, we follow our High Priest, our Forerunner, through the veil and into the Holy of Holies of the heavenly tabernacle. It is here, before the mercy seat of heaven itself, beneath the wings of the covering cherubim, that we draw near to God, because that’s where God is.

We do not dare to forsake this duty. Those who forsook it under Moses’ law died by stoning on the testimony of two or three witnesses.<sup>42</sup> If the Hebrews who first received this letter disregarded the warning and fled their duty, they would find themselves back in Jerusalem just in time for the Jewish

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<sup>38</sup> Heb. 2:17-18, 3:14-16

<sup>39</sup> See John Niemelä’s excellent two-article series on this subject, titled “No More Sacrifice,” available on the Message of Life website ([www.mol316.com](http://www.mol316.com)).

<sup>40</sup> Heb. 10:19-25

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Ex. 16:9, 34:32, Lev. 9:5, 7-8 (“draw near to the altar”), 21:17-18, 21, Deut. 4:11, 5:23, 1Sam. 14:36, etc. Joe Anderson has prepared an excellent workshop presentation on this very subject. As of this writing, the title is “Approaching God under the New Covenant.”

<sup>42</sup> Heb. 10:26-28

revolt, when God gave those who cried “Give us Barabbas” into the hands of Titus the Roman. It was a horrific time of starvation and famine, and many who lived to surrender to the Romans were crucified; being caught up in that was a fate much worse than being stoned under the law of Moses.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore the author urges them to hold fast to their faith,<sup>44</sup> in the way that the elders who lived as strangers and sojourners on the earth held fast in their time, seeking a heavenly country.<sup>45</sup> They have not yet received their reward, because God is giving us a chance to be fellow-inheritors with them.<sup>46</sup> Since we have this opportunity, the author urges us to set aside every hindrance and run our race with endurance, considering Jesus who went before us,<sup>47</sup> and being vigilant to watch over each other so that we don’t allow our brothers to fall prey to sin.<sup>48</sup>

This is important because we have not come to Mount Sinai—as terrifying as that experience was for Israel.<sup>49</sup> We have come to something far, far greater:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, and the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks of better things than that of Abel.<sup>50</sup>

Notice: “You *have* come...,” not “You *will* come, when you die....” You *have* come, already, to heaven. You have stood before the mercy seat, surrounded by angels and the spirits of the saints who have gone before. As Israel once stood before Sinai, you have stood before the very throne of God, on a mountain much more holy than Sinai ever was.

Therefore, we do not dare to disregard the word that God has spoken to us. We have priestly duties to perform:

Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.<sup>51</sup>

### **Back to “The Main Point”**

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<sup>43</sup> Heb. 10:29-31

<sup>44</sup> Heb. 10:32-29

<sup>45</sup> Heb. 11:1-38

<sup>46</sup> Heb. 11:39-40

<sup>47</sup> Heb. 12:1-11

<sup>48</sup> Heb. 12:12-17

<sup>49</sup> Heb. 12:18-21

<sup>50</sup> Heb. 12:22-24

<sup>51</sup> Heb. 13:15-16



This is why 8:2 is part of the main point. It is not just that Jesus performed His sacrifice and sat down at God's right hand. It is that He offered Himself in the Heavenly Tabernacle and sat down next to the Father on the Mercy Seat, and we follow Him into that Tabernacle and make our offerings *there*.

For the original addressees, the application was not just that Jesus had superseded the levitical system, so there was no point in going back. It was that going back would be abandoning their new station as members of the New Covenant priesthood. The author is saying to them, "How dare you abandon your post in the Sanctuary of the heavenly tabernacle to stand outside and let someone else offer a dead goat for you in an inferior copy of the real thing?"

### **The Point for Us**

For us, the point is that when we gather in worship on any given Sunday, the roof opens, the walls grow thin, and we are taken up into the Holy of Holies, there to offer the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God, to hear His Word from Him, and to be fed at Christ's Table. If you find that you cannot actually see the angels, well, we are Christians; we walk by faith, not by sight. By so doing the elders obtained a good testimony...and so can you.

Which brings us back to our application. The basis for our unity is Christ, who takes us into the Holy of Holies together. There we worship together before the very throne of God—and so does everyone else who belongs to Him. Consider a scenario with me. The time was last Sunday morning. The place was the Holy of Holies in the heavenly tabernacle.

*Two angels stood off to the side of the throne room watching as your church ascended into the Holy of Holies. The one turned to the other and said "I love these guys. Same time every Sunday morning, they show up, and look at how they love our Lord. Isn't it wonderful?"*

*While he was speaking, a second group had appeared next to the first. The second angel pointed at them and said, "Who are they?"*

*"Oh, that's another church in the same town, just about four blocks away. They show up every week too; just as faithful. It's wonderful to be able to praise the Lord with them both."*

*"Wow," said the second angel. "That close. They must have a lot of fun together."*

*"Not really," said the first.*

*"Why not?"*

*"Well, they've never actually gotten together down there. Their doctrinal statements don't quite match up; one of them sings mostly hymns and the other one does more praise and worship choruses—stuff like that. They won't even get together for a prayer meeting."*

*"Wow," the second angel said. "So the only place they ever worship together is here?"*

*The first angel nodded. “Yup. And you know what’s really sad about it – they even know that’s true. But they still won’t get together on earth.”*

The body of Christ is formed by *Christ*. Christ indwells me, and He indwells you—He is the basis for our Christian unity, His common presence in each of us—and nothing else could be. Put corporately, the people for whom Christ is the Forerunner, the people who, following Him, *actually show up in the Holy of Holies*, are the ones we’re unified with. Whether we like it or not. And we ought to act accordingly.

As over against the unifying power of the living Christ, our dependence on doctrinal-statement-as-basis-for-unity stands revealed for what it is: idolatry. Permit me to describe the idol: it starts with a tree, which is cut down and pulped to make paper. Half the tree makes writing paper, and on that we write down a doctrinal statement and revere it as the basis of Christian unity. The other half makes toilet paper, with which we...but you get the idea.<sup>52</sup> The toilet paper performs as advertised, but our doctrinal-statements-as-basis-for-unity—like all other idols—are deaf, dumb and blind, and “they that make them are like them, so also are all those who trust in them.”<sup>53</sup> Idol worship makes the worshipper stupid. In particular, idolatry brings about *relational* stupidity—an inability to attend to, understand, or communicate with other people.

Relational stupidity obviously does not conduce to unity, which is to say that like all other idols, the doctrinal-statement-as-basis-for-unity doesn’t actually work, and we have ample demonstration of this fact in the history of our own movement. This movement has had three decades of building unity based on correct doctrine, and look at us. Does the Free Grace movement seem particularly unified? Is the world falling on its face and reporting that God is truly among us?<sup>54</sup> Are people saying that those Free Grace folks must be the *real* Christians, because of the way we love each other?<sup>55</sup> Not exactly. Another decade of building unity like we have been, and there won’t *be* any Free Grace movement. Notice the lack of young faces in the crowd: we’ve built a reputation for division, and many of the younger guys who are trying to build ministries won’t touch us with a barge pole. Can you blame them?

We should also notice that the doctrinal statement is the part of our practice most likely to foment disagreement. If we’re willing to sing “Jesus Loves Me” with people who think it’s true, we’ll have to get along with a whole lot of people, at least well enough to sing with them. If we insist that the people we work with must all agree with our doctrinal statement, this will have the happy effect of cutting down the numbers quite a bit. The truth is that we like it that way. In this we are like the bleeding-heart liberal who supports ten African kids through Compassion International, but screams at the kid next door when his soccer ball wanders onto the front lawn. Does this person love children, or does he hate them? We all know the answer, don’t we? He loves the *idea* of children, but he hates actual children. Well, when we think of all those Free Grace churches in other states and cities as our brothers, even though we never actually see them, but we can’t get along with the Methodists just down the block, how are we any different?

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Isa. 44:13-20

<sup>53</sup> Psalms 115:4-8, 135:15-18

<sup>54</sup> 1 Cor. 14:24-25

<sup>55</sup> Jn. 13:35, 17:21-23, 1 Jn. 4:8

I am not suggesting that we drop our doctrinal statements, and I am certainly not suggesting that we paper over the disagreements. But before I get to what I am suggesting, I need to say a few words about the alternatives. There is a ditch on *both* sides of the road here. The folks who idolize unity-at-all-costs want to cover up the disagreements by emphasizing the agreements. A good example would be the ECT II agreement, in which Protestants and Catholics together affirmed “justification by faith”—all the while knowing that they didn’t actually agree on what those words meant. When we are getting by on ambiguous language that everyone can agree on *as long as nobody defines the terms*, then we are in deep, deep trouble. Athanasius resisted such a compromise at Nicaea, and we should follow in his honest footsteps. More about that shortly.

But our temptations do not lie in that direction. Rather, we idolize the doctrinal-statement-as-basis-for-unity, and are therefore tempted to cover up the agreements by emphasizing the disagreements. This is just as dishonest, and it reveals our idolatry for what it is. Our doctrinal statement will not share its glory with another; if it cannot be lord *of* all, then it will not be lord *at* all, and we will reserve the blessings of our company and cooperation for those who will bow the knee to the doctrinal statement, and whose mouths will kiss it.

The solution, of course, is to return to the truth: Christ is the basis for our unity, real relationship with the living Christ.<sup>56</sup> If we are true to this, then we can be honest both about our agreements and our disagreements, and act accordingly. Honesty neither avoids nor inflates controversy. The controversy is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end—the end being like-mindedness, to which we are commanded as believers:

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, *with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God.<sup>57</sup>

That like-mindedness cannot happen apart from honest controversy. But if we mistake the controversy for an end in itself, we become schismatic, and this is both sin and completely ineffective at achieving

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<sup>56</sup> Of course, people will immediately ask, “Which Christ?” and that’s a good question. A measure of common sense is called for here. Peter’s conception of Jesus once included “not going to die on a cross, no way!” (Mt. 16:22//Mar.8:32//Lu.17:3). Nonetheless, we recognize that Peter had a real, saving relationship with Jesus. It would be much harder to replicate Peter’s error today, after the event. But various misconceptions and distortions persist about Jesus. Not every one rises to the level of being “a different Jesus;” some are just errors about Jesus. Suppose I ask someone if he knows Robert N. Wilkin. He says, “Sure. Tall, skinny, real big head, wife’s name is Sharon, runs some kind of Grace Association or something—lives in Houston, right?” Well, he’s not right on every detail, but it’s clearly the same guy. But what if he says “Yeah...I remember reading of somebody by that name...federal judge, as I recall, ruled in favor of segregation on municipal golf courses in Nashville, back in 1952. Yeah, Wilkin. That’s the guy.” Of course we would all recognize that he’s talking about a different person. (But a real one—see “U.S. Judge Rules Segregation ‘Natural’” *Jet* 3:6 (December 4, 1952) 8 (accessed via Google Books on March 29, 2010).)

Likewise with Jesus. It is necessary to have a sense of proportion.

<sup>57</sup> Phil. 1:27-29

like-mindedness. We split the church and start up a new one on the other side of town, and call this defending the truth. Congratulations; we have defended the truth by running away. And then we sit in the new church with all our like-minded fellow schismatic malcontents and think, “Now we’re like-minded.” Why, because the folks back in the old church are no longer part of the Body of Christ? But of course they are. They are still our people; the two of us still worship side by side in heaven; we both pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven—although we’re trying to prevent it from happening in *our* neighborhood.

No, the way to like-mindedness is neither to avoid the controversy by stifling it before it starts, nor to defend the truth by running away, nor to gin up a political majority and “end” it by driving out all opposition—which actually just hardens people further in their positions. The way to like-mindedness is *through* controversy, and we must keep at it until it’s over. This is what the apostles did in Acts 15, and it is what we should do as well.<sup>58</sup> Please don’t mistake me to be passing lightly over doctrinal matters;<sup>59</sup> what I am calling for here is actually far more work, and far more painful, than what we usually do.<sup>60</sup>

But we are *Christians*, and we do a great deal more than talk doctrine, important as that is. This being the case, when we consider cooperating with someone, there is a sliding scale. If we are praying to different gods—Yahweh and Allah, say—then there is no ground for cooperation at all. Likewise if the appeal is to some sort of contemplative inter-spiritual mystical experience that allegedly transcends any particular creed. Ba’al and Allah are demons; the generic ‘higher power’ is just a demon that won’t state its name for the record.<sup>61</sup> There is no concord between Christ and demons; we cannot eat from the Table of Christ and the table of demons. Scripture is very clear on this; we must not compromise.<sup>62</sup>

If we are praying to the same God, though, and we can agree on what to pray for, then we have a basis for unified action *at that point*. If we can agree on a song with which we may glorify the Lord together, then we have a basis for singing that song together. If we do not agree about the use of charismatic gifts in worship, then we do not have a basis for holding a joint worship service, but maybe we get together to pray and even sing a few songs, just not for a full-blown worship service. If we do not agree on the timing of the rapture, then we probably ought not to host a prophecy conference together—unless we’re hosting a series of debates.

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<sup>58</sup> See Nichols, “Lessons from the First Great Church Fight” (GES National Conference workshop 2008) for further discussion.

<sup>59</sup> While we’re on this: why is it that the schismatics get to pretend that they care about doctrine, when the truth is that they care about their pet doctrine—whatever it is—and they care nothing for the doctrine that Christ has united us all to Himself in *one* Body, which is a cardinal point of Christ’s work (e.g., Jn. 17:20-23, Eph. 2:14-18)?

<sup>60</sup> I ought to know; I’m doing it right now.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Cor. 10:19-21

<sup>62</sup> American conservatives regularly *do* make such compromises. On February 18, 2002, President Bush, who claims the Christian faith and whom we claimed as one of our own, performed acts of worship at a Shinto shrine in Japan. These were not merely displays of respect for Japanese culture; they were acts of devotion. The Japanese prime minister, who is constitutionally forbidden to participate in public worship, had to wait in the car while our President entered the shrine and worshipped. In the aftermath of our Christian president bowing to other gods, there ought to have been a firestorm of Christian protest. There was not; the silence was deafening, and evangelical support for Bush wavered not at all.

A full-orbed approach to the things we do together as Christians will expose a great deal more common ground than we might have suspected, especially in the area of worship. Our common worship inevitably leads to a measure of visible unity, which is a vital part of our witness in the world. When Jesus prays for unity among us, He asks it “in order that the world may believe that You sent me.” How will Christian unity move the world to believe unless they actually see some?<sup>63</sup> This unity, in turn, provides us with an experiential and relational basis for peaceful discussion of the doctrinal disagreements. Within an honest appraisal of what we have in common, it is safe to discuss the disagreements honestly and to say the necessary hard things with a minimal chance of making the division worse. But first, we need the shared experience to build the relationship, and a commitment to continue in shared worship where possible in order to maintain the relationship.

And so we come to our second application, which has to do with how we approach worship.

### **Broad Evangelical Application: The Worship Wars**

Suppose a young husband comes home from work, ready to surprise his wife. “Honey, get yourself ready!” he says. “We’re going out!”

What’s the first question she asks him? Right—“Where are we going?”

Suppose, being a little thick, he says, “Aw, shucks, love, don’t worry about that. I’ll take care of everything. You just get ready.”

You know what comes next. She insists on some kind of information so she’ll know how to dress. Are they going swing dancing? Are they going to the bowling alley or the ice rink? Are they going out for a moonlit picnic on the back forty or to some place where the menu is in French and they serve a cheese course? Where you are matters; context is king. And so it is on Sunday morning. If you think you are just in a building made with hands, then you approach questions about what to do in church one way. If you understand that you are in the Holy of Holies, that’s a different context altogether, and it requires a different approach.

### **The Worship Wars**

It is precisely this vision of worship that is lacking in the present battles known as “the worship wars.” In these fights over what to sing and how to arrange a worship service, many people have put forth all manner of factors to consider. We are going to ignore most of these factors as secondary, because the fact that our worship takes place in heaven causes us to examine the issue from a different vantage point entirely.

**What Sort of Worship is Appropriate?** Trying to get a group of Christians to come to agreement on an answer to this question is a nightmare. Everyone has his own internal compass when it comes to what is appropriate, and no two of them point in the same direction. But Hebrews teaches us that we should

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<sup>63</sup> Thus it comes about that among us—the group *most* devoted to evangelism based on the Gospel of John—our own divisiveness undermines the very thing which John’s gospel tells us will win the world. In dividing over whether someone’s evangelism is sufficiently Johannine, we ourselves entirely fail to be Johannine.

ask the question differently: “What sort of worship is appropriate *in Heaven?*” Knowing that we are worshipping in heaven, we have a better compass. Time forbids going into this in detail, but let me sketch out a way of answering the question. We do have a number of biblical scenes that describe heavenly worship for us. It behooves us, as late arrivals, to join in with what is already happening before the throne. If we find that they sing, then we should sing. If we find that they praise God, then so ought we to do. If we find that they bow down, we should consider doing the same. If innumerable angels and the spirits of just men made perfect are worshipping in a certain way, and we are joining them, then, well, we ought to join them.

**What Does God Want to Receive?** The battles against one musical style of worship, and for another, generally have to do with how they make us feel. One person says that the old hymns feel worshipful, and this new stuff with guitars and drums doesn’t at all. Another person feels like the hymns are dirges sung at God’s funeral, and the guitars and drums bring a little *life* to the worship—and the fight is on. But this way of approaching the question is exactly backwards. Our praises are sacrifices to God, and in sacrifice the question is never just what *you* want to give; the question is what *God* wants to receive. Starting with Cain’s offering in Genesis 4, the Bible repeatedly and clearly condemns choosing your sacrifices based only on your own desires. It was a bad idea then; it was a bad idea for Nadab and Abihu; it was a bad idea in Malachi’s time; it’s a bad idea now.

What *does* God want to receive? God actually tells us quite a lot about this, and it is the subject of my workshop tomorrow. Just to give one example, God wants to hear us sing psalms; He says so multiple times in the New Testament.<sup>64</sup> There are 150 of them, and how many does your church sing? So we all have room for improvement. But more about that tomorrow.

### Conclusion

We worship in heaven, following after our High Priest who has entered the Holy of Holies first as our Forerunner. We who worship in heaven are all of one, children of the same Father, and therefore we are eternally unified in a way no disagreement can sever. Because this is true, we should give careful attention to making our worship fitting for the heavenly context in which we find ourselves.

This means that we should strive to learn about heavenly worship and imitate it. We should devote ourselves to discovering what God wants to receive so that we can give it to Him, skillfully and unreservedly. And we should go into His presence unified with our fellow worshippers.

We will achieve none of these aims perfectly. This is sanctification, and sanctification is a process in which we grow day by day. The charge I would set before you is this:

- Pursue fitting worship that God desires at whatever imperfect level of maturity your present growth allows.
- Be confident that your Father will accept your worship because He has accepted Christ your High Priest as your forerunner, and you come following Him.

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<sup>64</sup> Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16, Jam. 5:13

- Pursue peace with all your fellow worshippers at whatever imperfect level you are able to achieve.
- Again, be confident that the Father will accept your efforts because He has accepted Christ.

When we all raise our voices in praise in our respective churches on Sunday morning, we are also in heaven, worshipping together, led by our High Priest, who always lives to make intercession for us. There, we are unified — one people of God worshipping before one throne. There, we are holy. May our godly worship *there* overflow into our lives *here*, that our Father's will may be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. For His is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.