



# WORSHIP: Awesome or Just Plain Awful?

A conversation with theologian **ROBERT WEBBER**

**BOB SMIETANA**

**T**here's a paradox at the heart of the Christian faith—we believe that the same all-powerful God who created the universe also walked the earth as a living, breathing human being. That paradox has been the center of theological debate for centuries, but has also caused practical concerns for the church in worship. How do we celebrate these two understandings of God—the almighty creator and the man who told his disciples they were his friends? The transcendent God who is far above this mortal world and the immanent God who walks beside us day by day?

This paradox has helped fuel the “worship wars” between those who favor contemporary worship, with guitars and casual atmosphere, and those who favor a more traditional approach to worship that maintains a sense of sacred space and reverence.

But both of these viewpoints are

incomplete, argues author and theologian Robert Webber. Writing in his online newsletter, “Ancient-Future Talk,” Webber says, “Here is the dilemma. Traditional worship, with its emphasis on hymns, creeds, and stained-glass windows, makes God remote. Contemporary worship, with its casual ‘bring your coffee to worship and slap your neighbor on the back as you sing, shout and sway with your hands in the air,’ makes God too common.”

What's needed is an approach that takes into account both God's immanence and God's transcendence, drawing on all of the church's experience through the centuries, in an “ancient-future” approach, as he puts it.

Webber has some personal experience with this dilemma. A graduate of Bob Jones University who taught theology at Wheaton College for thirty-two years, Webber caused a stir when he became an Episcopalian in the 1980s and embraced a more liturgical approach to worship.

The author of forty books, including *Worship Is a Verb*, *The Ancient-Future Faith*, *The Younger Evangelicals*, and *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Webber is the William R. and Geraldine B. Myers Chair of Ministry at Northern Baptist Seminary. He also is a frequent speaker at churches and denominational events, including the 2004 Covenant Midwinter Conference.

Bob Smietana, *Companion* features editor, talked with Webber about the state of worship in Protestant churches, and what he thinks the future holds.

**CC: How do we regain a sense of awe in worship?**

**RW:** We have really dumbed-down our worship, and I am trying to suggest in my work that maybe we don't understand either transcendence or immanence. We have replaced transcendence with boredom, and we have replaced immanence with familiarity, and as a result we don't have either transcendence or immanence in much of our worship experience.

Recovering a sense of awe is a long journey and I think that we have to put our heads together and start thinking theologically—the theologians and the practitioners need to engage in deconstructing the modernist ways of doing worship and recovering the sense of mystery.

There aren't any tricks. I can't give you three little things to do to recover awe. I am just simply saying that as a collective body of people we need to reflect on this question and perhaps God will break through and give us some wisdom.

**CC: What do you mean when you say we have replaced transcendence with boredom?**

**RW:** It's almost as though we feel that if our worship is hard to get a hold of, if it is intellectual, if it is rote, if it is ritual, that somehow it will produce a

sense of otherness. Transcendence is all about otherness, but the otherness should not be a kind of intellectual boredom that is produced by many of our traditional churches.

Transcendence and immanence are

not separate—they are two sides of the same coin. If you look at all the instances in the Bible where God encountered people—God encounters Moses in the burning bush; God encounters us in the incarnation; God encounters us at the baptism; God encounters us at the transfiguration—there is always a visible and tangible sign. The bush. The holy of holies, the



Robert Webber

transfiguration of Jesus at the mount of transfiguration. The water of baptism. We need to think about ways in which immanence and transcendence are brought together around sign and symbol.

**CC: In one of your online columns, you write about romantic narcissism—about worship music that focuses on having a romantic relationship with God. How do you differentiate between being God's**

**friends, as Jesus called us, and this kind of "Jesus is my boyfriend" worship?**

**RW:** Friendship is one thing. Romanticism is another. Narcissism, which has been very prevalent within our cul-

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ture, is the love of self. And the New Age movement has extended the love of self to a kind of romantic spirituality of self, because the self is considered to be God.

So the overtones of New Age spirituality have spilled over into a kind of romantic Christianity, where many of our worship choruses are saying things that are really inappropriate: "I want more of you," "I need you," "Put your arms around me," "Hold me tight," "Kiss me." These phrases are actually found in our worship choruses.

I think that romanticism removes the relationship of God from one of grace to a relationship with God that is sentimental romanticism. It makes us expect some kind of feeling as the basis for our relationship with God and undermines the gospel.

**CC: The songs you are talking about could be classified as love songs to Jesus.**

**RW:** I just wrote an article on this for *Worship Leader* magazine. Some of the music, if you take the word "God" out of it—and some of the songs don't even have the word "God" in them—I could sing it as a love song to my wife. That seems to me to be pretty far away from what the gospel of God's grace is all about.

Romanticism really is a new kind of legalism. Because it says, if you don't have this kind of romantic relationship with God, and you are not "falling in

Bob Smietana is features editor for the *Companion*.

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love all over again”—that’s another one of the phrases—then you don’t have a good relationship with God. So a relationship with God becomes something that I have to create, that I have to generate.

I have been in communities where they sing these kinds of songs and I am just empty—I just stand there and say, “I can’t sing this stuff. I don’t feel it, I don’t embrace this.”

I tell my students, I don’t have a relationship with God. God has a relationship with me. It is a completely different way of thinking than this modern song and music that is so romantic. I really think that in the end a lot of people will say, “You know, I don’t really have this romantic feeling.”

**CC: What has led us to the point where there is so much romanticism in worship music?**

**RW:** I see four phases of music in the contemporary scene. In the early days of the Jesus movement, it was a biblical phase. A lot of good stuff came out at that time. Then we got into the narcissistic, the me-oriented, phase. It is about what I do: “I magnify you,” “I praise you,” “I exalt you,” “I worship you,” “I enthrone you.” It just goes on and on and on about what I can do for you God, aren’t you so lucky today.

And then it shifts to the romantic, first writing songs about what we can do for God, then songs about having a romantic relationship with God.

**CC: What about a hymn like, “My Jesus I Love Thee,” which focuses on what God has done for us?**

**RW:** That’s a wonderful hymn. Obviously our love for God is appropriate. But it’s not a romantic, sentimental kind of love. It is a love of obedience, a love of faithfulness, a love of covenant.

My wife and I were visiting in a

church and they sang “put your arms around me, hold me tight” and there was this couple in the pew in front of us that acted out the entire song—first they held hands, then they put their arms around each other, and pretty soon they were kissing. I was blown away. This song, which was about God, was being acted out between a couple.

I failed to mention that I see a fourth stage—which as a stage is going backwards, kind of ancient-future. For example, Michael W. Smith’s “Agnus Dei” is a wonderful song. Or Chris Tomlin’s “Oh the Wonderful Cross.” That is great stuff.

There does seem to be a shift going back to restore hymns, to restore biblical imagery, to restore biblical depth to our songs. I think a lot of people have simply found much of what has been done in the last thirty years to be vacuous and empty. Banal. Trite—to use a few nice words.

**CC: You became an Episcopalian while you were teaching at Wheaton College, a bastion of the evangelical world. There have been a number of articles and books recently about young evangelicals converting to more liturgical faiths. Have you seen evidence of this?**

**RW:** I am in contact almost weekly with people who are moving in these directions. I think that it is born out of a couple of things. On the one hand, they are really frustrated with evangelical churches. Evangelical churches, with their trite worship, just don’t connect with many young people today. They would like to incorporate more liturgy into their churches but the boomer leadership isn’t going to let them do it, so what they end up doing is finding a happy home in Orthodox, Catholic, or Episcopal circles.

There are a couple of things that are

very important in those churches. First, there are roots, whereas evangelical churches don’t have roots, or they don’t pay attention to their roots.

Second, there is a connection—they feel they are connected with all of history and connected globally with a large community of Christian people.

Third, they feel it to be more authentic, more real. It’s more genuine, it’s not hyped, it’s not slick. It’s not a sales pitch, it’s not based on advertising. It’s based on a lot of deep theological tradition. [Young people] are very interested in tradition today, where as the boomers were innovators. They basically wanted to throw out every thing from the past and start the church over again.

**CC: In one of your columns you talked about hearing a sermon from a guest speaker, which had no illustrations, just straight Bible exposition, and that people flocked to talk with him after. It was as if those people were spiritually parched, you said.**

**RW:** I am not saying a person should not have any illustrations, for there were people who felt the sermon was a little dry. But for someone like myself, I really enjoyed it because I get so sick of hearing all of the stories.

Most of the times on Sundays we have pabulum—stories and entertainment and all that kind of stuff. It seems to me that there is less and less embracing of the pabulum. In this case, when somebody comes in and their preaching is not entertaining—it’s very thoughtful and engaging—people just rushed to the front to talk to him.

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truth. They want to be challenged.

### **CC: What are some of the other things we are missing in our worship?**

**RW:** What we are missing is any kind of biblical theology on worship and any kind of biblical pattern of worship. No sense of confession, forgiveness, centering prayer, things of that sort. Very little Scripture, seldom do we celebrate the Eucharist and when we do it seems to be pretty watered down—I'd say we are missing about 90 percent of it.

The word *sacrament* has fallen into disuse. People have negative connotations of it, people have no idea of what it really means. Back to your earlier question about recovering awe—that is not going to be recovered until we recover sacrament. Because sacrament is connected with awe. As I said, when

you look at the burning bush, you have both transcendence and immanence there. The burning bush is in a sense a symbol of what happens in the sacrament. But if the sacrament is just done in a dry and intellectual way, then it is dreary and there isn't any sense of God's presence there.

### **CC: So how do we restore the other 90 percent of worship you talked about?**

**RW:** This is a discussion we have at the seminary where I teach. Students want to know, "How do we regain this kind of worship that has depth to it?" And I say two words: truth and passion. We have all been in liturgical services where there has been a lot of truth but not passion. We have been in evangelical-type churches where there is a lot of passion but relatively little truth. So you have to take truth and bring it together with passion.

We need to study the liturgies because they have handed-down truth, and that is the way you hand down truth—you hand it down in your worship. And if we don't do truth, I fear what is going to come in the next generation. If all we do is pabulum and romance and seeker stuff, we are going to end up with a pretty weak church to hand down to the next generation.

There were three things that were true of the early church in the context of a pagan culture. Pagan culture did not have anything to believe, they did not belong to any kind of community, and they did not have patterns of behavior. And the Christian Church comes along and says, "We believe, we are a community, and here are some patterns of behavior." I think in the context of a postmodern world, we need to go back to the convictions of the early church. We believe, we belong, and we act on our beliefs. □



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