Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Why I Love the Church, Part 5

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John MacArthur

The Church Is an Earthly Expression of Heaven

Here's a yet another reason from Scripture why I love the church: It is like heaven on earth. I don't mean that the church is perfect, or that it offers some kind of utopian escape from the realities of a sinful world. But I mean that the church is the one place where all that occurs in heaven also occurs on earth.

Christ instructed us to pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). In what sphere is that most likely to occur? In the United States Congress? Not likely. In the Supreme Court? Probably not. In the university? No. City Hall? Don't count on it.

Where is God's will done on earth as it is in heaven? Only in one place, and that is the church.

What goes on in heaven? If all the activities of heaven were to be brought to earth, what activities would predominate?

First of all, *worship*. In every biblical description where men of God had visions of heaven, the one thing that stands out most is worship. Praise, adoration, and devotion are constantly being offered to God in heaven. We see it, for example, in Isaiah 6:1-3, where the prophet Isaiah wrote,

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory."

We see it in Revelation 4:8-11, where the apostle John wrote,

And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was

and who is and who is to come." And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."

In other words, every creature in heaven is perpetually engaged in worship.

Worship is also one of the main activities of the church. In 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul described what took place in a typical meeting in the early church, he wrote, "When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (v. 26). There he describes activities whose design is both to worship God and to edify the worshipers. And if an unbeliever came into the meeting, this was the desired response: "the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and *worship God*, declaring that God is certainly among you" (v. 25, emphasis added).

A second activity of heaven is *the exaltation of Christ*. Having finished His earthly work, Christ is now seated at the Father's right in glory in pure exaltation (Acts 5:31). God Himself has exalted His Son, and given Him a name above every name (Phil. 2:9). Christ is "exalted above the heavens" (Heb. 7:27). And throughout all eternity we will be occupied exalting His name (cf. Rev. 5:11-14). Meanwhile, the church is the one sphere on earth where Christ's name is truly and genuinely exalted.

A third activity that takes place in heaven is *the preservation of purity and holiness*. Heaven is a holy place. Revelation 21:8 says "the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars" are excluded from heaven, consigned instead to the lake of fire. Revelation 22:14-15 underscores the perfect purity of heaven's inhabitants: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying." No one is admitted to heaven who is not holy (Heb. 12:14).

Likewise, the church on earth is charged with preserving purity within her own midst. Matthew 18:15-20 lays out a process of discipline by which the church is to keep herself pure, if necessary through excommunication of members. It's not necessary in this context to outline the whole discipline process, but take note of the promise Christ makes in verse 18: "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Binding and loosing were rabbinical expressions that spoke of dealing with people's guilt. An unrepentant person was said to be bound to his sin, and a repentant person was loosed. Here Christ suggests that when a church on earth follows the proper procedure for discipline, they in effect mediate heaven's verdict in the earthly church. Heaven is in agreement with their decision. When the church on earth excommunicates an unrepentant member, the elders of that church are simply declaring what heaven has already said. Church discipline is therefore an earthly expression of heaven's holiness.

Another activity of heaven that occurs in the church is *the fellowship of the saints*. Our fellowship in the church on earth is a foretaste of the perfect communion we will enjoy in heaven.

The church, then, is like an earthly expression of heaven. It is the closest we can get to heaven on earth.

There's a lot of talk these days about "user-friendly" churches. Church growth experts counsel church leaders to try to provide an atmosphere in which "unchurched" people can feel comfortable and at home. That strikes me as an utterly wrong-headed approach to the church. "Unchurched" people who come into our fellowship out to leave saying to themselves, *I have ever seen anything like this on earth!* If they walk away thinking, *Ah, that felt comfortable. That was familiar*—then something is seriously wrong. The church should be like a preview of heaven.

The apostle Paul wrote of "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). More than any other institution on earth, the church is where the truth of God is upheld. The church is called to lift up the truth and hold it high. Employing the truth as a weapon, we are to smash the ideological fortresses of Satan's lies (2 Cor. 10:3-5). And it is in the pursuit of that goal that the church will ultimately realize her greatest triumph.

All of that is why I love the church. And as long as the Lord gives me breath, I hope to invest my life and energies in the ministry and advancement of the church's mission.

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