

The Cure for Cultural Conformity

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Revelation: Looking at Life From the Perspective of Heaven Series

Revelation 4

Garrison Keillor, the writer and radio story teller, in one of his Lake Wobegone stories talks about seeing a group of pastors get off a bus one day. They were all middle-aged, slightly balding, about 30 pounds overweight, wearing Hush Puppies and jackets with patches on the sleeves over their turtlenecks. They were all incredibly nice people, maybe a little too earnest. The kind of person who holds your hand a little too long as they ask the question: So, how are you, really? Really, really nice; really, really inoffensive people. He looked at this group of pastors and he said: this is the least threatening group of people you could ever encounter anywhere.

We've been doing a series from the book of Revelation. And John in the book of Revelation, chapter 3, tells us about a church in the city of Laodicea, which was a lot like these pastors. The church in Laodicea was a wealthy, comfortable, absolutely inoffensive complacent church. The church in Laodicea was like a lot of wealthy suburban churches today, who basically say: The most important thing is to not get too worked up about religion. Calm down. Don't get too radical about your Christian faith. Religion is fine in its place. Let's not go overboard about this.

You know, the wealthy suburban church who says: Let's not get too extreme. We would just die is someone shouted "Amen" from the pew, or raised their hands, or did anything that anybody else might feel is a little too emotional. We never want to offend anybody or make anyone feel even slightly uncomfortable. We would never publicly protest anything. You will never find us standing on some downtown corner with a sign.

Laodicea represents every church in every age that has sunk into middle class respectability. Churches that have a risk-free faith, nothing strenuous. The most important thing is to make sure that church gets out in time for us to go to the club for lunch and get our favorite table. It is horrible when church runs over and the Jenkins get our table. That's what is really upsetting.

No extreme sacrifice. No radical commitments. Everything in moderation, especially religion. That's the Laodicean church. Everything in moderation.

Have you ever been in a church that was so respectable, so inoffensive, a church that is like a neutered, aging Golden Retriever – nice soft muted colors, nice soft lighting, plush carpet, nothing here to ever push you in any direction that you don't want to go. The church spends its time half asleep just going through the

motions of the Christian faith. Have you ever been in a church like that? The biggest decision in the church's life concerns whether the carpet in the lobby needs to be replaced. That decision requires a year and a half study.

The biggest crisis in the church's life is that a neighborhood child eggs someone's BMW. The Board is up in arms. Do we need to post guards to ward off little 9-year old suburban terrorists? The message is there are just a bunch of religious platitudes, basically communicating every week the same thing – that God is a very nice God, who sent a nice Savior into the world with one message: to tell the world to be nice and to play nice with each other. Churches are set up to train people in niceness. Pastors exist to model niceness for everyone else.

To this inoffensive, sleepy, utterly neutered, completely conformed suburban church, Jesus says in Revelation 3:20-21,

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Rev 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Rev 3:21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Perhaps the self-sufficient Laodiceans had neglected the communion table where they could feast upon Jesus. Perhaps this complacent church neglected real radical connection with the resurrected Lord of life.

Jesus, who we have discovered in this series is the Chief Pastor of every church, he gives a powerful invitation at the end of his message: If anyone opens the door, I will come in.

But you know, it is not just the comfortable, conformed complacent Laodiceans who are invited to open the door. It is also the suffering, slandered church in Smyrna, and the compromised, culturally accommodating church in Thyratira and everyone, everywhere at every time that experiences the pressure of the world to whom Jesus says:

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Rev 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

How does Jesus, the Chief Pastor, of every church lead his church away from lukewarm Laodiceans, suburban conformity? How does Jesus, the Chief Pastor of every church, encourage churches like the one we read about in Smyrna to not collapse under the pressure of Roman persecution and martyrdom. How does Jesus, the Chief Pastor of every church, guide churches like those in

Thyratira who are being pressed into the mold of the world sexually and economically?

Does he tell the church simply to pull up the drawbridge, that the way to deal with the world is to hunker down into your church. Pull your kids out of public schools. Don't watch any movies or TV or listen to the radio like people did 300 years ago in Europe. Don't go public with your faith; instead, build enormous walls around the church like the medieval monasteries. Is that the life Jesus invites his church into – a life of defensive withdrawal?

And if it isn't, how does the church everywhere – in the suburbs and in the inner city, in times of peace and in times of war, in countries that persecute and in countries that are supportive. How does the church everywhere resist cultural conformity? Looking like, thinking like, feeling like, pursuing same goals, have same dreams, religion and judgments as everyone else. How does the church resist cultural conformity?

We're going to look at that today in a message I've titled "The Cure for Cultural Conformity." Let's pray.

SLIDE – Revelation 4:1-11

Rev 4:1 After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

Rev 4:2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

Rev 4:3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

Rev 4:4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

Rev 4:5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

Rev 4:6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.

Rev 4:7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle.

Rev 4:8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come."

Rev 4:9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever,

Rev 4:10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

Rev 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being."

There has been a tradition of interpreting Revelation 4 as the beginning of a radically new section in the book of Revelation separated from Revelation 2 and 3, perhaps by thousands of years. Many interpreters really camp upon this phrase in verse 1 where we read:

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"Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

Literally, John says: "After these things, I looked and behold a door standing open in heaven." Many interpreters say that "after these things" means after the things of the church, or after the church age. Thus, everything in Revelation 4 and following speaks about a time in history after the church is gone, in other words, after the Rapture. So they say that Revelation 2 and 3 speaks about the early church and then from Revelation 4 through 19 we are transported forward to the great tribulation period before the return of Christ, but the church is entirely absent from Revelation 4 on.

Well, I reject this viewpoint. There is nothing in this text that suggests the absence of the church, or the end of the church age, or the Rapture of the church. Nor is there anything here about a 2000 year separation between chapters 2 and 3 and chapter 4. I believe when John says "after these things, I looked" he is simply saying that this is the vision I saw next. And this vision in ch. 4 and 5 was a vision designed to assist 1st century churches. It was a vision designed to help the church in Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira and Laodicea to deal with the cultural pressures that they were under from the world.

As I told you in our first week of study, Revelation is not just a look at the future, but it is rather heaven's perspective on life in this world at whatever time in history we are living. Chapters 4 and 5 are a vision not only for the 1st century, they are a vision for us in Central Ohio, and a vision for churches in New York City, and churches in California, and China, and Uzbekistan, Iraq, and the Sudan to deal with the pressure that they're encountering in trying to follow Christ in their cultures and situations.

So, what is the vision? The vision in chapters 4 and 5 is a vision of worship. What John is communicating to us is that the power to resist the conforming pressure of this world comes out of our worship. Worship is not some escapist trip according to Revelation 4 and 5. Worship is not our withdrawal from the material world so we could get caught up in the spiritual world. Christian worship is the radical defiance by Christians of this world's idolatrous claim to be all that there is. Christian worship is our radical refusal to be conformed and dominated by our problems, our grief, our families, our government. In worship, we are shouting a defiant "no!" to all the pressure in this world that wishes to squeeze us into its mold. How many of you have ever thought: The most radical way I can counteract the conforming pressure of this world is not marching downtown with a sign, or launching a new website, or recording my thoughts on a blog. The door that the Laodiceans were invited to open is the door of joining in heavenly worship. Verse 1,

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Rev 4:1 After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

Worship opens the door for the complacent, comfortable Laodiceans. Worship opens the door for the suffering, slandered church in Smyrna. Worship opens the door for the sexually immoral, economically compromised church in Thyatira. Worship opens the door to ultimate reality that clears your mind so that you can see through all of the illusions, all the hype, all the advertisements, all the media, all the marketing jingles, all the what's hot; what's not, all the ideas of what is important and what isn't important, all the superficial and shallow advice handed out by those whose own lives are a mess. The door to ultimate reality, to what Francis Schaeffer, the Christian philosopher, used to call True Truth is opened through worship.

Worship is not escapist. Worship of the true God is the most radical, culturally defiant act that you can ever engage in. In worship, we say: I'm not going to allow my mind and spirit to be filled with all the lies and garbage that this world wants to fill me up with. I am going to turn with all of my being towards true truth.

So, where do we start in worship? If we are going to resist the pressure of our particular temptations and particular conforming pressures, we have to start at the right place. The right place is not an analysis of our particular temptations and pressures. The starting point of radical non-conformity with our world is the worship of God. Verses 2-3,

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Rev 4:2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

Rev 4:3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

The Christian church, and we as individual followers of Christ, often come up with totally inadequate answers for the mess we live in because we start in the wrong place. If you are a teacher or administrator in the Columbus Public Schools, how do you deal with the mess that is currently in the Columbus Public Schools, especially with what is going on in Mifflin High School?

How do we, as American citizens, deal with international messes like that in Iraq, or in the Darfur region of Sudan, or in Togo? How do you deal, as an individual, with your own family mess, the mess that is your marriage, or the mess that is your sex life, or the mess that your kids have fallen into? How do you, as an individual, deal with the trauma of your past, or a present grief that results from the loss of a loved one, or a financial mess, or an addiction, or depression, or any other pressure that you are under? How do churches break free of the middle class, suburban captivity that so many churches in America fall into?

John does not start with the pressure that the church is under. He doesn't start with a thorough-going analysis of Roman power, or how to handle persecution, or a discussion of the problems of wealth, or the seduction of middle class respectability. John starts with the worship of God. Revelation 4 and 5 say to us that if we are going to deal with our particular messes, we have to start with the worship of God.

- Who is God?
- How is God connected to my present situation?
- What is God up to here?
- What is God saying?
- How is God leading me in this present situation?

The starting point of our thinking is God. So often churches and individual Christians and counselors get it wrong right from the opening shot because we begin with the problem. We discuss the problem. We analyze the problem. We think about the problem. We struggle with the problem. We never get very far. In fact some of our solutions cause more problems for us and we end up with bigger messes than the mess we start with.

As one old pastor said: So many Christians are rushing toward the flames of hell with little squirt guns trying to put them out. Have you ever felt that way? There are these blazing fires everywhere, all around you, and people you talk with have problems, and you have problems. All you have is a little squirt gun.

The starting point for the healing of our problems, the starting point for the resistance to conformity to this world is the worship of God. Whatever you are anxious or frustrated about, friend, in whatever you are struggling with today, slow down and go back to the start again. Start with God. Who are you, God?

Where are you in this situation? What are you trying to do in my life? What do you want to produce? How do you want to lead me?

And what do we discover when we begin with God? We discover that God is faithful. Verse 3,

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Rev 4:3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

Many interpreters trip over the symbolic meaning of each jewel in the Bible. The Bible doesn't tell us the symbolic meaning of jasper or carnelian, or emeralds, or pearls. I believe these precious stones are mentioned simply because they speak of wealth and magnificence. To be decked out in precious jewels in the ancient world is designed to tell us that our God is splendid, our God is beautiful, our God is worthy of our attention. He has all the resources in the world to answer our problems. And what we find surrounding this beautiful, magnificent, splendid, wealthy God is a rainbow.

Why is there a rainbow around the throne of God? John is reaching back to the Old Testament vision of God in Ezekiel 9, which reaches back even further to the rainbow that God set in the sky for Noah. Some of you know the story, maybe you learned it as children in Sunday School, but following the flood, God made a promise to Noah to never flood the earth again and he sealed this promise with a rainbow.

God in the Bible always gives some sign, some token, of his intention to be faithful to his promises. The promise of forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is signified, it is sealed by the communion bread and wine. You taste that bread; you drink the little cup of juice and the Lord wishes to speak to you as you engage in this act of taking communion. The Lord says to you: You can trust me. I am merciful and I will forgive you and cleanse you from your sins. As far as the east is from the west so far has the Lord separated you from your sins. The promise to Abraham that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the beach was sealed with the sign of circumcision. And so the promise to Noah was signified by this rainbow.

The other night Marlene and I took our granddaughter for ice cream. We were talking about a personal issue that we were struggling with. And just then people rushed out of the ice cream shop and began pointing at the sky. I picked up my granddaughter and we walked out. There in the sky was the most beautifully complete rainbow that you could imagine. I walked back in and Marlene said: Do you think that God is speaking to us now to trust him that he hears our prayers? I said: Absolutely. I felt the very same thing when I saw that rainbow.

I love the little tokens of God's faithfulness.

Let me ask you a question. You are under pressure. You are being squeezed into the mold of this world. Do you pay attention in this conforming culture to God's little signs, God's little tokens of faithfulness? You are going through some difficulty right now. Do you know that God in his mercy will speak to you, perhaps through the words of a friend, a counselor or a mentor? Perhaps God will speak through something you read. Perhaps it will be through a letter in the mail, or through highlighting something in the Bible, or through nature. Friend, in your life right now, are you aware at all of God trying to speak to you? Do you pay attention to signs of God's personal communication with you? Do you live with a sense of God's presence in your life? Do you ask the question often: What is God saying to me? How is God leading me? Has God been trying to get through to you?

In worship, we push the pause button on our lives and we pay attention to God. And we pay attention to these little signs, these tokens of God's communication. In worship, we allow ourselves to feel the presence of God.

John's vision is not only of God, his splendor, his wealth, his magnificence, his faithfulness, but John offers us a specific vision of God's location in this universe. John sees God seated on the throne in the center of all of creation. Verses 4-6.

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Rev 4:4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

Rev 4:5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

Rev 4:6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.

What a profound revelation. The universe that we live in [and you can underline this] is a God-centered universe. Now this revelation, that the universe is a God-centered universe is completely contrary to our sin natures. As the result of the fall of men and women, we all have an in-born tendency not to live God-centered lives, but rather to live utterly self-centered lives. The great Protestant Reformers back in the 16th century used to define sin as the self curved in on itself. Instead of being a tiny planet revolving around infinite God, in our sin we try to get every thing to revolve around us. In our sin we try to exercise a gravitational tug towards the rest of the world. In sin, we demand that we be the center of attention and affection and admiration and respect. We live Ben-centered lives,

Bonnie-centered lives, Jennifer-centered lives, Justin-centered lives, Shaniqua-centered lives, and Mookie-centered lives, Jose, or whatever your name is-centered lives. We live lives centered on us.

Listen to couples argue. Married couples, have you ever gotten into this kind of argument?

What about me? What about my needs? How about how I feel about this?

The other person responds and says: Well, don't my feelings count for anything? We always talk about how you feel. Don't I have needs also?

Back and forth: You don't meet my needs. Well, you don't meet my needs.

The psychologist Larry Crabbe calls this the two tics and no dog syndrome. Both people are trying to suck the life out of each other, but there is no dog. In other words, there is no God that people are relating to.

The self-centered life, the life curved in on itself – that is the essence of sin. And by the way, that is the essence of insanity, living in your own self-created, self-centered world, self-promoting, self-indulgent, self-seeking, self-satisfying, self-aggrandizing, self-absorbed, self, self, self.

Do you know what salvation means? Everywhere you go you see the statement Jesus Saves. We read it on highway overpasses. It is scrawled on bathroom walls. People put it on bumper stickers. What does it mean that Jesus saves? What does it mean to be a saved individual? What does Jesus save us from? What does Jesus save us for?

Jesus saves us from the illusion that life revolves around us. Jesus saves us from the self-centered life. And Jesus saves us for the liberating truth of the God-centered life. Jesus saves us so that we can live in the true truth that life exists primarily not to make me happy, but to make God happy. Or as the great English Presbyterians put it 350 years ago on that banner over there that we have on the right side of the room: The chief end of man (the purpose in other words for which we were created) is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. The chief end, the purpose for which we were created is not to make the universe revolve around us.

I say this with affection, but I don't think that most of us in the church get this basic idea that the universe is God-centered. I am a saved person when I lay down my demand to be the center. I am a saved person when I lay down my demand to have life go my way. I am a saved person when I reject the illusion that everything revolves around me. Through worship I bring myself into conformity with the most fundamental truth of life – that all of life, my life, your life, revolves around God. My ultimate purpose is to live for God, to glorify God

and enjoy him forever. Worship lines me up again. Worship centers me back in the true center – God.

As I said, most people in the church don't get it. Even those who claim to be saved. Let's be honest. We pervert this message of living for God's glory into a message that basically communicates that God exists to meet my needs. You have a need? You are depressed. You are anxious. You are in crisis. You are sinking financially. You can't get pregnant. Your spouse has just issued an ultimatum. They want out. They've gone to their attorney. You are under pressure. You go to God. So far so good. Go to God. We should go to God with our needs and our concerns, with all of our burdens and fears. But if in going to God you begin to believe that the most important thing in your life is not how could you live for God, what is God saying, what is God leading you into, how can God help you to either endure this or overcome this? If in coming to God you believe that the most important thing is for God to meet your need, however urgent it is, then you are not living in a God-centered universe.

In the 31 years that I have been a follower of Jesus Christ, I have seen person after person walk away from Jesus Christ after declaring their love for him because Christ did not meet their need.

- Christ did not help me with my sick child.
- Christ did not come through with a spouse to end my loneliness.
- Christ did not keep his end of the bargain.

Brothers and sisters, I say this with affection, but your need and my need is not the center of the world. We do not worship our needs, we worship God. And only in the worship of God, as we push the pause button and allow ourselves to disengage from the urgent screaming pressure of our pursuits and our needs can we respond to the true truth that God is at the center. Only in worship do we go from our frazzled, fractured, jangled, culturally conformed life to a peaceful, ordered centered life, a God-centered life.

Do you feel like your life is fractured into a thousand parts? Do you ever feel like everything and everyone is making a demand on you and taking a piece out of you? Worship God. Center your heart on him.

And in his vision of worship, God is not only in the center, but God is also on a throne. According to Gene Peterson, the author of the wonderful Bible paraphrase, "The Message," the throne of God is the central revelation of the Bible. The throne, of course, is the King's throne, the throne of government, the throne of authority, the King of Kings is seated on a throne. All the stories in the Bible are about people who either bring their lives into submission to the throne, and bow before the throne, thereby finding peace, or instead, people who turn their backs on the throne and are living in rebellion to the throne, and as a result live chaotic, ruined lives.

Where are you in relationship to God's throne today? Would you picture yourself near his throne kneeling, bowing, submitting – or would it be more accurate to see yourself as having your back towards the throne and you are a million miles away?

Virtually every chapter of the book of Revelation mentions the throne of God. Why? Because the major issue for people in John's day was the competing claim of the Roman throne. The idolatrous claim of the Roman government that Rome held the final say and Rome held all the power, and the Roman Emperor was in control.

But the throne of God is the centering reality of our worship. God's government, God's control, God's authority – when we worship, we are bringing ourselves back in line with this truth: no other powers, no other ultimate authority. When we worship God, we push the pause button in life long enough to ask ourselves: Who or what is dominating my life right now.

Let me ask you that. Who or what controls you? Who or what pushes your buttons? Who or what pulls your strings? Who has the power, what has the power to determine your moods, your happiness, your joy, your sense of significance and security? John is communicating in this book that if anything or anyone is on the throne other than God, then we're guilty of the great sin of idolatry.

Those are pretty strong words, but that is what Revelation is about, the competing claims regarding who has the right to sit on the throne. There is this constant competition in our own hearts regarding who has the right, who is going to sit on the throne. Who is going to call the shots? Who gets to make the determination? You or God?

Who is on the throne, friend? Is it your kids? Parents sometimes mistakenly believe that they should live for their kids. Now, if you parents really mean that – Mom, if you really are living for your children, Dad, if you really do center your life on your kids – that is idolatry. If your kids are on the throne for you right now, then here is what's going to happen. You will either over-control your kids because you will desperately need them to succeed and to fulfill your dreams. You will over control them and they will kick away from you as soon as they can. Or on the other hand, if something goes wrong with your kids, you will be shattered. Mom, dad, the only way to love your kids is to love God more than your kids. Get your kids off the throne and start worshipping God.

Singles often put their boyfriends or girlfriends on the throne and live for their boyfriends or girlfriends. You can tell if you've done this by asking yourself two questions. If you are still dating, is there anything about your relationship with your boyfriend or girlfriend that is pulling you away from God? In other words, is God's government, God's authority, God's throne in your life being resisted and

compromised because of your relationship with a man or woman? If God's throne is being compromised in your life, if your back is toward the throne, you've made that man or woman into an idol. In your dating relationship, is the picture both you and your boyfriend both kneeling and submitting before God's throne, or is only one of you worshipping? God's call is to come back to worship him alone. To defy the pressure of dating through the worship of God.

If you've broken up with your boyfriend or girlfriend, you can tell if you have idolatrously placed them on the throne by looking at your reaction to a break-up. If you were sad for a month or two, that is normal. If you felt like killing yourself, then your boyfriend or girlfriend became an idol. The healing of your heart will come through the worship of God. Singles, the only way to love your boyfriend or girlfriend is to love God more than you love your boyfriend or girlfriend.

Take any good thing – work, your kids, the law of our country, patriotism, the military, career, the pursuit of some cause – the cause of life, the cause of justice – take any good thing and make it into an ultimate thing, and that thing will drive you into the ground. The only way to find freedom from things that are driving you into the ground is to worship God. Adore him. Kneel before his throne. Serve the one living and true God with your whole heart. That will set you free from the enslavement to whatever idol you've attached yourself to.

Finally, in worship we not only recognize that God is in the center, and that God is on the throne, but we also recognize that God is our Creator. Verses 6-11.

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Rev 4:6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.

Rev 4:7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle.

Rev 4:8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

Rev 4:9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever,

Rev 4:10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

Rev 4:11 “You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,

for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

The 24 elders has been various interpreted. Some commentators see an illusion to the 24 divisions of priests that King David set up in the Old Testament. Others see in this divisions of angelic beings. We can't be dogmatic about these things. But the best possibility in my mind is that the 24 elders are a double 12 – the twelve tribes of Israel and the 12 Christian apostles. In other words, they represent the Old Testament nation of Israel, and the New Testament church.

What we have represented by the 24 elders is the people of God before the throne of God worshipping. It is not just God's people that are worshipping. We see these four living creatures, verses 6-8,

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The four creatures cover all aspects of creation just as the 24 elders cover all aspects of the people of God. The lion is the noblest of the creatures. The ox is the strongest of the farm animals. The human is the wisest creature. And the eagle is the swiftest bird. Everything excellent, everything good, every creature - they are all worshipping. The creatures are full of eyes. They are totally aware, totally alert and they are soaring with six wings.

We look at life and it is such a mess. The Columbus Schools are in crisis, so is much of the world. Iraq, the Sudan, North Korea, Togo. Many of our lives are jangled and confused. There are divorces and broken relationships that we experience. We struggle with addictions and anxieties. Where do we go for answers? Where do we turn for hope?

To God our Creator. Verse 11,

SLIDE

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to receive glory and honor and power,
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and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

Why is it so significant in this crazy, conforming world to worship God as Creator. How is this a defiant move against the conforming pressure of our culture? When we worship God as Creator, we are saying that this world is not a closed system. The world did not make itself. So our problems, in other words, do not have to be solved simply by solutions within this world. We can go beyond the world, we can go beyond nature, we can ask for super-nature, supernatural help to find solutions to problems in our world.

Or to look at it from a slightly different angle, if God is the Creator and source of all things, he can also be the Creator and source of new things. God our creator can give us new answers, new solutions, fresh possibilities. The Creator is always full of fresh possibilities. Creator God, who made the world, can remake the world. Creator God, who made your marriage, can remake and renew your marriage. Creator God, who gave you life, can give you a new life. And Creator God, who gave your children life, can give your children a new life.

The Creator is always filled with new and fresh possibilities. And so our hearts are filled with hope when we worship God the Creator. Here is the vision that John gives us in Revelation 4. The Old Testament and the New Testament people of God, prophets and apostles, lay people and pastors, animals and birds, angels and human beings, centered, submitted to his governing throne, bowing before God their Creator, finding in him new answers, new solutions, fresh possibilities. All of creation centered, submitted worshipping, full of peace and full of hope.

So Jesus stands at the door and knocks. Whatever pressure, whatever has come to bear in your life, Jesus is standing at the door knocking. And we open the door into freedom, peace and hope when we choose to worship. Let's pray.

The Cure for Cultural Conformity

Rich Nathan

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