

Real Heaven Anchors Everything

Brian Schrag

By that Sunday morning, circumstances and I had battered my soul into a bone-weary mess. Our life's work—translation of the Bible into the Mono language of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)—was in jeopardy. Our Congolese friends were in the middle of a war that the rest of the world thought had ended. The minister in the Updike novel I was reading had poignantly and convincingly decided that God didn't exist, and I was jet-lagged from my flight from France to Dallas. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually weakened, I trudged into Southwest Harvest Church.

At the first sounds of the choir and worship band, my heart stirred. They were singing songs I knew. In English, my mother tongue. They were standing, clapping, and swaying the way the congregation in my home church in Chicago does. After over a year of learning to worship God in new ways in France and before that, three years in DRC, here was something familiar. Tears moistened my cheeks. My broken voice reflected perfectly the broken spirit beneath it as I joined my brothers and sisters in worship. We stood and prayed for each other, hand in hand. I was singing and worshipping God with my heart, surrounded by people with skins and voices and clothes and words and gestures and improvisations that I knew and that had accompanied some of my life's most profound communication with God.

And God began to rebuild me.

A Throne

I am part of an expanding global movement of ethnodoxologists motivated to action by experiences like these, learning to connect earth to what's really going on in heaven. John's vision in Revelation 5:7 informs our work today:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

We envision the dumbfounding variety of beings around God's throne in Heaven, and pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' In response, we join with other believers to adore God together more and more, and encourage every community on Earth to do the same. The new discipline of ethnodoxology integrates missiology, worship studies, and ethnography in tools that encourage local creativity and liturgical patterns in response to God. We are growing toward this future participation around the throne in Heaven.

But the “every nation, tribe, people and language” phrase introduces some daunting, systemic challenges. First, most of those who spread Christian faith cross-culturally in the 18th through 20th centuries adopted a Bring-It Teach-It approach to arts and worship: they brought the songs, clothes, sacraments, and liturgies that accompanied their spiritual journeys, eager to share. When the beneficiaries of their ministry and sacrifice took a generation or more to catch on, they were often surprised and frustrated, but persisted. God has used this persistence to further his kingdom. For example, I’ve had profound experiences of unity when singing “How Great Thou Art” or “Soon, and Very Soon” with people from disparate communities. But how deep is this unity? And what has been its cost?

Where my family and I lived in DR Congo, artists in local genres had been excluded from the protestant church since its birth 50 years earlier. Too many churches today maintain stronger cultural and artistic ties with the cultures of the missionaries that planted them than with the communities in which they are to be salt and light, witnesses and lovers. Second, globalization and urbanization are sparking all sorts of energy and creativity where culture meets culture. But the stronger, more self-assured groups usually gain at the weaker’s expense. The languages and artistic genres of many minority communities are dying, excluding local artists from exercising their gifts in the church, and diminishing many people’s experiences of home in worship. I expect that the smashing into and intertwining of the diverse voices of all of those peoples will produce fusions and fissions that will add immeasurably to the glory of the throne room. But until then, encouraging the older local expressions of worship that make experimentation possible remains an urgent task.

A City

But real heaven extends even beyond the throne room:

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. *The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.* (Rev 21:22-26)

The New Heavens and New Earth will contain Christ-followers with bodies somehow material, somehow connected to their bodies on the Old Earth (1 Cor 15:35-49; John 20:27; Acts 1:9). They will be part of complex, renewed societies where Jesus’ laws of love, purity, and joy exist. They will have the capacity to travel to the New Jerusalem, each carrying their most astonishing, unique creative expressions. Governors, plumbers, farmers, and sculptors will all enter the world where God’s light shines everywhere.

This supernaturally quotidian view of Heaven inspires me to do this on Earth: Develop all of the gifts that God has given me, to extend the kingdom in all its social-material-spiritual-communal nature. In God’s kingdom, there is no death and no sickness, only shalom, love, health, peace, and obedience to Father | Son | Spirit. My primary mission focus with Revelation 21 in mind is encouraging kingdom growth in every community.

Throne *and* city will fill our eternal lives, the ultimate integration of God's cultural (Gen 1:28, 2:15, 9:1) and missionary (Matt 28: 18-20) mandates. We need to study and imagine both while we're still on this earth, to shine and entice and give courage.

(dis)continuities

Implications of these imaginings for our life on earth require understanding the relationships between the kingdom of heaven in heaven and the kingdom of heaven on earth. Jesus taught his followers to pray for the kingdom of God to come to earth (Matt 6:10). He described it as centered on himself and his message (Mark 1:15), growing mysteriously but to great size (Mark 4), marked by values contrary to human social systems (Mark 10; 12; Luke 6), and connected in practice to healing and spiritual warfare (Luke 9; 11). The kingdom of God on earth mysteriously but concretely reflects the reality of life in heaven, and God wants us to help it expand.

A basic characteristic of the kingdom of God is that it exists only partially on earth now. Jesus brought heaven near (Luke 10:9), but his creation groans in expectation of its ultimate rebirth (Romans 8:22). Every community expresses heaven in some ways, and hell in others. Now and not yet. No human culture fully expresses God's kingdom, but because God created us in his image, there are glimpses of the kingdom everywhere. And Jesus wants us to feed heaven, and starve hell, always anticipating the complete, real life ahead.

Something Still Missing

But even the New Heaven and New Earth in all their fullness and peace seem to lack something essential: Where will discovery, adventure, growth, and creativity happen? Much of our satisfaction on Earth results from overcoming pain, obstacles, and sin. Helen Keller said, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." Without suffering and brokenness to move beyond in Heaven, where will be the sense of accomplishment and victory? What is the bottom rung on the perseverance-character-hope (Rom 5:3-5) ladder if not pain? Infinite ease hints at eternal boredom.

Fortunately for my irascible imagination, our life in Heaven won't be about ease, but about constant growth toward God's infinite likeness. As mathematician Eugenia Cheng notes, the difference between an unimaginably high number and infinity is not one of degree, but of kind. In the same way, God is qualitatively different from humans: great beyond our understanding (Job 36), with thoughts above the heavens (Job 11:8), who created the universe from nothing (Gen 1) and holds it all together (Col 1:15), whose loves surpasses knowledge (Eph 3:17-19), and whose removal of sin is farther than East is from West. We won't need sin to have adventure. Instead, we will have God without barriers. His infinitude will take on the substance of an object that I leverage from one step to another. In C.S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*, the cry to run further up and further in is not one with a static goal, when the Narnians ultimately reach the completion of Aslan's country. No – the journey and growth will never end.

Both|And. And. And. And...

Poetry helps knead this future reality into my muscles, mind, and heart
(www.brianatplay.com/memories):

Soul, you'll quickly learn that heaven needs no crucibles to melt and press Life from the Real You. God will still press, you will still have challenges and 3-steps-forward-2-steps-back projects. You will still grow in courage and love and hope and peace, but the Enemy will be astoundingly and utterly absent. There will be no wrongs to overcome, just countless paths toward infinite Completeness: God. You'll never reach the end of every path, but each step or jump or flight or fall will happen in Father-Son-Spirit. Only and All.

You no longer need evil to be your foil, injustice to spark righteous anger and brave acts, wailing to inspire empathy and hospitality.

Don't worry, Soul – you will grow into God.

Never being Him
Always becoming more like Him

Anyone can learn to worship God in unfamiliar artistic, linguistic, and cultural contexts; many missionaries have shown this. And God can and does speak through and around all sorts of barriers. But I learned in Dallas that there's something profound about being home. About the peculiarities and particularities of a culture that is mine. My heart language. Heart worship. Heart arts. And it is this depth and fullness of communion with God that I want all people in the world to be able to experience.

Real heaven makes sense of everything. We know what God wants: partnership in the increase of heaven on earth. We know what heaven looks like: Worship around the throne, rich existence with no fear in God's city, and the delight of discovery unencumbered by sin. And we know what our task is like on this groaning earth: marked by both shalom and sacrifice, where we choose to forego much of real heaven now so we can bring others into God's kingdom. Come quickly, Lord.

Brian Schrag, PhD, serves as head of SIL International's Ethnomusicology and Arts Group. He worked as a Bible translator and arts consultant in Central Africa and founded the Center for Excellence in World Arts at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics (Dallas). Brian is also on the board of the International Council of Ethnodoxologists (www.worldofworship.org).