

Reformation
& Revival



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Jesus said that God must be worshiped in spirit and in truth. And it has become commonplace to contrast spirit and form as if they were incompatible in worship. “The letter kills, but the spirit gives life” is a text that out of context (2 Cor. 3:6) can be used to justify slapdash leading of services and other Christian activities. Spontaneity and lack of preparation are equated with spirituality. Leviticus 6-7 denies this: care and attention to detail are indispensable to the conduct of divine worship. God is more important, more distinguished, worthy of more respect than any man; therefore, we should follow His injunctions to the letter, if we respect Him.

A glance at the performing arts dispels the illusion that a great and spirited performance can be achieved without practice and attention to detail. Indeed great actors and musicians spend hours studying and rehearsing the works they are to perform, so that they can recapture the spirit of the author and convey it in their performance. Audiences expect performers to aim at perfection in the concert hall. Worship is also a performance, a performance in honor of almighty God. As no orchestra can give of its best without a competent conductor and meticulous rehearsal, so no congregation is likely to worship our holy God in a worthy manner without careful direction by a well-instructed minister.

Gordon J. Wenham
The Book of Leviticus (1979)

The gospel, Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:4, is a statement about the glory of Christ. If that strikes us as strange, it may be a measure of how far we have wandered into bypaths in our preaching and teaching, of how much we have debased the coin with which we were left to trade.

A common criticism of present-day evangelicalism is that it is man-centered, not God-centered. We do not have space here to examine how far that is so, but the fact leaps out at us in our feeble attempts at witness as we try to convey to others “what Christ can do for you.” We know men love themselves, and we try to use that fact as a bridge across which we may bring them the Savior of sinners. So “you” runs the danger of becoming the heart of the message, with Christ coming in a significant but distinct second. But Jesus Christ is the heart of our message. We do not preach the gospel unless we seek to display the glory of Christ.

What has all this to do with the subject of worship? A great deal, as we shall see.

Take the experience of the Samaritan woman in John 4. She has come at noonday to draw water from the local well. There a Jewish man asks her for a drink. She is surprised. Jews, as John says in verse 9, do not associate with Samaritans. Neither as a woman nor as a Samaritan does she expect to converse with passing Israelites. Not that she is unwilling—she doesn’t turn her nose up in disdain. Instead she asks the obvious question, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” It is hard for us to imagine what kind of answer the woman expected. But what she got is plain enough: an introduction into the glory of Christ. Listen to Jesus’ reply: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water” (v.10).

At first, of course, this was lost on her. To her, living water probably meant running water. There was such water

at the bottom of this well, but it was obvious that the man had nothing to draw with—neither pail nor rope. One fact did strike her, however: this man was making some kind of special claim for Himself. Why not follow up on that? “Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself . . .” (v. 12)? That would keep the conversation flowing and give the man a hero to compare Himself with, if He cared to.

He did care to:

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (vv. 13-14).

No doubt Jacob was a great man, but he drank from the well because he often became thirsty. Jesus offers water that satisfies forever. So much for the comparison with Jacob. It is evident from her reply that the woman is both intrigued and confused. “Sir, give me this water that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water” (v. 15).

“Go, call your husband and come back,” says Jesus (v. 16).

“I have no husband,” she replies (v. 17a).

Is this conversation going anywhere? Has it reached an impasse, a dead end? No. It is rising to a fuller revelation of the glory of Christ. Jesus says to her:

You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true (vv. 17b-18).

Here is a man who not only makes claims for Himself, but He backs them up by an unearthly insight into the affairs of

a stranger.

The woman gropes for a category to put Him in. “Sir,” she says, “I can see that You are a prophet” (v. 19). High praise indeed—from a Samaritan! But not yet high enough. A little more conversation will bring them to the apex of this discussion. Then Jesus will say, “I who speak to you am He,” i.e., the Messiah, the Christ of God (v. 26), and the woman will run to tell her townspeople of a man “who told me everything I ever did” (v. 29).¹ Her tentative addition, “Could this be the Christ?” probably reflects the conviction of her own heart, tempered by the fact that her fellow Samaritans know her well enough to treat her skeptically.

Sandwiched into this conversation that reveals the glory of Christ is a discussion of worship. It opens with a remark by the woman: “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” (It has often been thought that this is a diversionary tactic on the woman’s part: Jesus has struck just a bit too close to home by referring to her multiple husbands. The quicker we leave that subject, the better!) Jesus, however, treats her question as the occasion for serious teaching on the subject:

Believe Me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth (vv. 21-24).

Looking at the scope and depth of Jesus’ words, we must feel grateful that the woman raised this important issue. With these words our Lord makes the following points:

Samaritan worship is ignorant worship (cf. Acts 17:23); Jewish worship is informed worship because the Jews have been the channel of God's revelation; true worship is about to be set free from the limitations of a particular place; and worship in this new time will be more nearly conformed to what God is like than ever before.

Each of these points is worthy of further study, but there is one more point here we will concentrate on: Samaritans will shortly be among the true worshipers. "A time is coming," says Jesus, "when you [plural, meaning you Samaritans] will worship the Father. . . ." From a first-century Jewish perspective, this idea was revolutionary.

In an important sense this is the point toward which the conversation has been moving from the outset. Let's examine this issue more closely.

Why did Jesus force this woman into some grasp of His own character and person? "Well," says someone, "I suppose He wanted this woman to be saved, and there is no salvation without knowledge of Christ." Quite so. But what does it mean to be saved? According to the New Testament it cannot mean less than to become a worshiper of God.

Here it is necessary to distinguish between formal acts of worship and the attitude of the worshiping heart. When the woman raised the question she probably had the former in view. On nearby Mt. Gerizim the Samaritans acted out their understanding of formal worship. Jesus recognizes a certain legitimacy in this idea of formal worship, though He denies that the Samaritans' worship conformed to God's requirement in any way. Nevertheless that is not His main point.

I never tire of citing the words of the Puritan, Thomas Watson: "We glorify God when we are God-admirers." Here we are in a different world, the world of attitudes and affections. Here we are reminded that worship is not the aggregate of formal acts. In this context, worship is a

response to greatness. Here there is the marriage of attention and spontaneity. The heart, fixed on God, rises out of itself in adoration and praise.

There is nothing wrong with formal acts of worship. They may be likened to the protocol one might learn to meet the Queen of England, such things as how to bow or curtsy, for example. But surely such a meeting would produce something else, the awe inspired by a significant presence. (Oddly enough, that very awe might interfere with a proper carrying out of the protocol!) And it is that awe that Jesus commends to us.

It is that awe that Jesus commended to the Samaritan woman. He did so by displaying His own greatness. "But wait," someone may say. "Isn't there some confusion here? How is the display of Jesus' greatness likely to lead this woman to worship the Father?" That is a fair question; let's see the answer.

If the gospel is a statement about the glory of Christ—and it is, according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:4—there is something more we need to know about that glory. The glory of Christ is the glory of God. Listen to Paul in verses 4-6:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

At first glance we may think we have misread Paul. What is his subject, the glory of Christ? Or the glory of God? But a closer look shows us Paul's meaning. Jesus Christ has come into the world to display His own glory. Unbelievers do not see that glory, of course. Their eyes are blinded by

“the god of this age,” Satan. Believers, on the other hand, can say with John, “We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

It is not just any glory that Jesus Christ displays; it is the glory of One who came from the Father, the glory of One who is filled with the attributes of God, such things as grace and truth. In other words, those who see Christ see what the Father is like. This explains Jesus’ words to Phillip:

Don’t you know Me, Phillip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? The words I say to you are not just My own. Rather, it is the Father, living in Me, who is doing His work (John 14:9-10).

In leading the Samaritan woman to Himself, Jesus was simultaneously leading her to the Father. When she saw even a glimpse of Christ’s glory, she saw something of the glory of the Father, because Jesus Christ is the image of God. This explains something else as well.

In John 4:23 Jesus speaks of “the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.” That raises the question: just how does the Father seek worshipers? Let me say two things about that.

First, let’s clear away a possible misunderstanding about this “seeking.” Jesus does not mean to suggest that such worshipers already exist in the world, and His Father is looking around to see if He can locate them. Given the fact of endemic sin, there are no men, women or children who naturally worship God. Paul’s word stands: “There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God” (Rom. 3:11). God’s seeking, whatever it is, must be far different from this.

Second, Jesus’ own activity is the answer to the question, “How does God seek worshipers?” Throughout the

conversation with the Samaritan woman God was seeking her in His Son, the Lord Jesus. “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). His seeking is the seeking of the Father.

What does that mean to us today, we who live long after the Savior’s bodily presence on earth? In what way does God seek sinners now? Oddly enough, the bodily absence of Christ does not change the way the Father seeks sinners today, nor does it change the reason for which He seeks them. Let me explain what I mean.

In opening the book of Acts the author, Luke, tells us that his Gospel recorded “all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven” (Acts 1:1-2). The word “began” is suggestive. Luke probably means to tell us that the book of Acts is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus. It is but a small step further to realize that that ministry continues until this very day.² The Father still seeks men and women through His Son wherever the gospel that centers in His Son is preached.

And He still seeks sinners for the same reason, to make them worshipers, or “God-admirers,” to use Thomas Watson’s phrase.

We may see this focus on worship in the model prayer given to the church in Matthew 6:9ff. What is the first thing we ask? We ask the Father to “hallow” His name. What does that mean? It means that we want to see God’s person set apart from the ordinary things of life and to be put in the high place it deserves. It is another way of saying, “Glorify Yourself, Father,” or “Cause men and angels to worship You!” The model prayer starts with this request; this is first; all else comes afterward.

This is evident also throughout the Epistles that reflect on the activity going on in the first-century church. While words literally meaning “worship” are uncommon, the idea is everywhere as the Christian’s natural reaction to the

grace of God. God's electing grace allows "no one to boast before Him" (1 Cor. 1:29). Is that the end of all boasting, then? By no means—"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31). What else is this but worship?

That command, intended no doubt to characterize all of the Christian's life, is but the tip of the iceberg, an iceberg whose massive dimensions come into sight when we review the frequent use of the word glory in the letters of the New Testament. For example: "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:36). Paul's point could not be clearer: God's constant activity is a perpetual call to glorify Him. Think on His act(s) of creation, and worship Him! Reflect on His endless maintenance of what He has made, and praise Him! Consider the end for which He made all things, and magnify Him! "To Him be the glory forever!"

And one thing more.

Paul not only thinks grace produces praise in the individual, he thinks of himself as gathering a grand choir, a new race of musicians whose talents are dedicated to worship. All this (he writes of his taxing ministry) is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:15).

What is Paul saying? He pursues his ministry—a ministry of grace—for the good of his hearers and readers. With what effect? Increasing numbers of people are touched by grace, and they return thanks to God. The thanksgiving grows as each is added to the choir until the voices spill over in exuberant worship. This is no accident—not at all. It is the goal Paul has in mind. It is not only his goal, it is God's goal.

Long before Paul, Jesus aimed to add the Samaritan woman to that choir of praise. It is, in fact, the reason "He had to go through Samaria" (John 4:4). It has been said, "A seeking sinner and a seeking Savior cannot fail to meet." But

the news is better than that. The sinners God seeks through Jesus are not seeking Him at all. But He succeeds in bringing them to Himself. And when He does so, He adds them to His choir of praise and worship forever.

- 1 It is generally agreed that the Samaritans, who limited themselves to the Pentateuch and ignored the rest of the Old Testament, looked upon the Messiah as the greatest of prophets, the prophet of Deuteronomy 18:18. They did not have the high expectation of the Messiah's person and work that the Jews had. The effect, then, of Jesus' telling the Samaritan woman that He was the Messiah was to challenge her to advance in her thinking from a prophet to the greatest of all prophets, a category which was true though inadequate. The following verses seem to show that she did, in fact, make that advance. She may, however, have gone much further.
- 2 While Acts reaches the end Luke planned for it when Paul preaches the gospel in Rome, there is nothing at all to suggest that Christian activity after that point in time would be any different from what it is in Acts itself. With the coming of Jesus the end times began, and they go on now and shall continue to do so until He returns. If Jesus Himself is the chief actor in the book of Acts, He remains so to this present hour.

Author

Tom Wells is pastor of King's Chapel, West Chester, OH. He is author of several books including: *Christian: Take Heart, A Vision for Missions, Come to Me*, and *Faith: The Gift of God*. He is a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.