

Relevance and Irrelevance in Worship

SERIES: the now of worship

By Doug Goins

Increasingly across our country worship is a controversial subject in the church of Jesus Christ. The Christian publishing market is flooded with books on the "worship wars" raging in our churches. There is tension between "emotional" worship and "intellectual" worship. There is conflict between "traditional" worship and "contemporary" worship, but even those categories are subdivided. There are "liturgical traditionalists" and "informal traditionalists." Even among traditionalists, there is controversy over what kind of music is most fitting--hymns, classical music or gospel music.

Contemporary worship is a phrase coined 30 years ago to describe styles and forms of worship attractive to youth culture during the Jesus Movement. Today, however, there are many youth sub-cultures, with wide-ranging sensitivities and tastes. In my family, for instance, my four children--ages 29, 20, 18, and 16--have four different cultural sensitivities. They have four different CD collections, and do not appreciate each others' music. So which is the most appropriate musical expression in worship for youth culture? Is it alternative rock, middle-of-the-road pop, hip-hop, folk music, swing, heavy metal, black gospel, ska or country?

Community prayer and preaching are both caught in the crossfire of the worship wars, but it seems like musical expression is the most volatile issue. Perhaps it is the one area in the life of the church where we are all experts. The credo is, "We know what we like; we like what we know; and we want what we know and like." That describes every one of us.

This division has been termed the "Balkanization of the church." The division over styles also has been described as the new tribalism, or sectarianism, in music and worship. Michael Hamilton, a professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, wrote an article concerning this controversy in the church. He says:

... American churchgoers no longer sort themselves out by denomination so much as by musical preference. Since the 1950's, denominational divisions have steadily become less important in American church life. We have the baby boom generation...to thank for much of this. But at bottom we are all still sectarians; we still prefer to congregare with the like-minded. Our new sectarianism is a sectarianism of worship style. The new sectarian creeds are dogmas of music.... Conflicts over worship in general and music in particular have erupted in churches of every denomination. Forty years ago, this heightened sensitivity to the details of worship and music would have been unheard of, but now it is the norm. All over North America, worship has become contested ground. (1)

Conflict over worship is nothing new, however. Our personal, sectarian tendencies are part of our sinful nature, inherited from Adam. These issues have been around since the fall. The first murder recorded in biblical history, Cain of his brother Abel, resulted from a conflict over acceptable worship. What sacrifice in worship is pleasing to God?

Jesus addresses this issue in the Gospels, and it is central to the passage we are studying. What is important and unimportant in corporate worship? John 4:16-26 deals with relevance and irrelevance in worship. There are two things to notice initially. First, in the conversation between Jesus and an anonymous Samaritan woman the word "worship" is used ten different times in some form. It is the Greek word *proskuneo*, introduced in our study of Revelation 4 and 5 (Discovery Papers #4621). It means to bow down in adoring veneration. It is personal worship, community worship at specific places and times. The only purpose in being a *proskunetes*, a worshiper, is to honor and glorify our Lord God. Secondly, notice that the conversation between Jesus and the woman centers around conflict in worship. An undercurrent of tension concerns the place of worship, whether it is Mount

Gerazim or Mount Zion; and the form of worship, whether it is the Samaritan or Jewish tradition. Look at the heart of this passage (verses 20-24):

"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

At first glance, we see a woman whose personal life is in turmoil, but she cares about worship. Jesus really cares about worship, and he wants to introduce this sinful, broken woman to the worship of God as a loving Father so that she can become a "true worshiper." Jesus wants her to see that God is the initiator of worship. He is always seeking people who will respond to him wholeheartedly as worshipers. The story around this interchange, John 4:1-42, reveals that it is only through personal relationship with Jesus as God's anointed Messiah, the Savior of the world, that one can truly worship the Father.

As I was studying this week, I saw myself in the story. Like the Samaritan woman, I struggle to understand what it means to worship "in spirit and truth." I get distracted by the issue of place in worship. In my years as a pastor, I have performed weddings in beautiful churches. Our church building, in contrast, is quite plain. I realize place does affect me. I like beautiful places to worship. I also get distracted by issues of form in worship. Too often, when we are singing hymns or praise songs together in church, I analyze the theology of the lyric instead of singing wholeheartedly to the Lord. I can end up criticizing the song, and by logical extension, find fault with the person who chose it, or wrote it, or who is leading it.

I know I am not alone in my struggles about form and place of worship because I have had innumerable conversations about these issues with people in our church over the years. I have done weddings in other churches because the couple wanted to marry in a pretty place rather than in our church. Recently I read a note to our worship pastor from a gifted young musician. He was declining to participate in Sunday morning leadership because he said the worship is "traditional and boring." I also had a conversation with an older couple recently, and they complained about how loud the music is on Sunday morning. The man said to me, "I don't think drums have a place in worship."

Form distracts us, but let me suggest a heart approach to this issue. If I am willing to accept God's grace to me in my worship distraction, and if I am willing to extend grace to those challengers in their distraction, then what we can all share in common with the Samaritan woman is a desire to find God in worship. We all need to ask the question, "How does God want us to worship him?"

To answer that, let's review the story. Jesus is traveling through the area of Samaria, and stops at noon by a well in a small village at the base of Mount Gerazim. Hot and thirsty, he is sitting alone at the well. A woman comes out by herself, and Jesus asks her for a drink of water. It violates the social customs of his time. The woman responds a bit derisively, mocking him for not observing the social conventions. Remember, God is seeking worshipers, through a relationship with this Son. Jesus responds to her in verse 10:

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Jesus wants the woman to know who he is, the one offering living water. But she misunderstand the water on a material, physical level. Jesus clarifies it for her in verse 13:

"Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water"

welling up to eternal life."

The offer is spiritual refreshment which is constantly available. It comes from inside, a quality of life that tastes of the eternal. It is water that is refreshing and invigorating and offers a life of love, joy, forgiveness and peace. Jesus offers the woman a spring of water bubbling up to eternal life, the Holy Spirit of God who wants to enter her life. Later, at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, Jesus reveals his Messianic identity using the same metaphor: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:37-39).

Jesus' loving initiative

The woman's response in verse 15 suggests that she has caught a hint of the spiritual significance of what Jesus is saying, but there is something blocking her. The sin in her life has wearied her, disillusioned her, and discouraged her. It blinds her to the spiritual transformation Jesus is offering. Because God is at work seeking worshipers through relationship with his Son, Jesus initiates with her again. He desires that she recognize who he is (verse 16):

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly."

Jesus says, "I have living water I want to give you, but something in your life has to be exposed and faced before you can receive it." Jesus does not confront the woman to condemn her, but to save her (John 3:16-17). He wants her to deal with the sin problem in her life, the problem of immorality. She has had five husbands, and now she is living with a sixth man. Her deep thirst for spiritual reality is evidenced in her response to Jesus in verse 19, as she raises the central subject of worship:

Increasing respect

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

It is the third time in the conversation she calls him "sir," *kyrie*, a title of respect meaning lord. It is significant that the third time she calls him lord, she also calls him a prophet. Her interest in him, and her sense of regard for him are intensifying. She calls him a prophet because of his amazing knowledge about her life and his spiritual concern for her. She senses in him a loving interest and a desire to see her life changed.

In calling him a prophet, she is also hinting at his Messianic identity. The Samaritans rejected all but the first five books of the scriptures, the Pentateuch, and even then rewrote it in part. The promise of Messiah is made in Deuteronomy 18, but the Samaritans revised it so that Messiah is merely a prophet who comes to settle legal problems and to restore worship to Mount Gerazim. The woman's sense that there could be something Messianic in Jesus leads her to raise the issue of whether Messiah will restore worship to Mount Gerazim (verse 20):

The place of worship

"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

There has been great speculation about the woman's motive in raising the issue of worship location. Is it an honest question on her part? Why does she raise the issue at this point? Is it a theological smoke screen to divert Jesus' attention away from her personal issues? Is she raising a political question about a centuries-old worship war between Samaritans and Jews? Or does it come from personal, practical interest? Jewish community life was

focused at the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Samaritan corporate worship was practiced on Mount Gerazim. Jacob's Well, where Jesus and the woman are sitting, was at the base of the mountain. They could see the summit and the ruins of the temple where Samaritans had established worship centuries before. Samaritans still worshiped there even though their temple had been destroyed 180 years earlier.

The division between Samaritans and Jews was deeper than the location of worship, however. The Jews hated the Samaritans and ostracized them because the Samaritans were of mixed Jewish descent. During the exile, when the Jews were taken to Assyria, colonists were imported from Babylon to live in Samaria. The Jews remaining intermarried with them. When the exiled Jews returned, they charged that the Samaritans were not only racially impure, but that they also mixed pagan worship with Judaism. The result was that the Samaritans established a separate place of worship on Mount Gerazim.

So why did the woman raise this issue? At the center of both Samaritan and Jewish worship was the sacrificial system. Sacrifice was the only way to deal with the problem of sin and the consequences it brings. When the woman's sinfulness was revealed by Jesus, her thoughts turned to sin, forgiveness, and cleansing. It had probably been in her thinking a long time. Since sacrifice for sin is the only solution, where does one go? Her heritage was based at Mount Gerazim, but this caring, sensitive Jewish prophet pointed to Mount Zion. She has an honest dilemma: How do I find God? Where do I worship him? How can I have my sins forgiven?

The irrelevance of place and form

Jesus' answer seems a bit abrupt in verse 21. The question, he says, is quickly becoming irrelevant.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father."

True worship, as revealed in the Lord Jesus himself, is not focused geographically, but spiritually. The right worship experience is not dependent on the right place or setting. It does not matter to which mountain we go or in what room we are sitting, and true worship, by implication, is not focused on any specific worship form or liturgical system. Jesus knows that the hour for his death is approaching, and through the victory of the resurrection he will destroy all the physical symbols of worship. It will no longer matter what exclusive symbols, activities, language, posture, or musical style are used. He will replace the temple with himself, and he will become the true focus of worship.

To answer her honest question, Jesus proclaims that place and form are irrelevant. We can meet God in worship anywhere through any cultural expression. What is important is that we meet a personal God who draws us into a love relationship with him. Because of her Samaritan heritage, the woman had not understood who God was as a loving Father, or how to worship him. Jesus approaches her because he wants to take away her limited view of God and her narrow categories of worship.

Samaritan and Jewish worship

In verse 22, it appears that Jesus takes sides in the worship wars. In a parenthetical statement found in verse 22, he contrasts Jewish worship and Samaritan worship:

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

Jesus clarifies for the woman the reasons why Samaritan worship is incomplete. Jews and Samaritans worshiped the same God of the Old Testament, Yahweh. What they knew about him, however, was different. Because Samaritans only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, they had only an abstract notion of God. They did not know the God who had been at work through centuries of Jewish history. They had incomplete revelation. The Jews, on the other hand, saw the complete character of God as Father (verse 21) because they had the entire revelation of the scriptures. They saw God in the fullest possible way through the sweep of history, poetry, wisdom, prophesy, and worship literature. Salvation is from the Jews because they enjoyed the anticipation of

Messianic hope, salvation coming through the anointed king, the son of David. He is not only a wisdom Messiah, as the Samaritans believed, but also a Savior Messiah who will provide the final solution for the sin problem. The woman had no concept of that spiritual reality.

The relevance of how we come to worship

So if the place and the form of worship are irrelevant, then what *is* important in worship? Jesus contends that our manner of worship is relevant. What is important is how we come to worship. In verses 23 and 24 Jesus says,

"But the hour is coming, and now is [because I am here, right in front of you], when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The coming of Jesus Christ--the hour of his crucifixion, his death, and resurrection--ushers in the final and essential mode of worship. In these two verses, the relationship between Jesus himself, the Spirit of God, and the truth of God are tightly bound together. Both times when John connects "spirit and truth" (once in each verse) he is speaking of the Holy Spirit, not the inner spirit of man. True worshipers in verse 23 are those who worship the Father in Spirit. In John 3, Jesus told the Pharisee Nicodemus that we are spiritually born again through the Holy Spirit. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew [from above], he cannot see the kingdom of God.... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh [human origin], and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (verses 3, 5 and 6). It is the Spirit of God who gives us the spiritual life to worship God in reality.

The apostle Paul affirms that God is worshiped as Father only by those people who possess the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who assures us that we are God's children, so we can call him Father: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,..." (Romans 8:14, 15). It is a supernatural work of the Spirit in our lives that we may come simply and honestly before God in worship. To be a true worshiper, we must be like a child in the presence of a loving father--at rest, peaceful, comfortable, authentically who we are.

Verse 24 tells us that God is spirit. That is not all he is, it is not his essential definition. In his first letter, John describes God as "light" (1 John 1:5), and as "love" (1 John 4:8). Each of these definitions has a different implication. God as spirit describes his dealing with us in the giving of the Holy Spirit. In John 14:16, 17, Jesus tells his disciples what the relationship is between the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and truth. Jesus says, "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him or knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." John's understanding of spiritual reality intertwines Spirit, truth, and Jesus himself. When Jesus prays for his disciples in John 17:7-9, he speaks of the truth that sanctifies, or cleanses, his followers. In John's gospel, Jesus is not only the truth incarnate, but he also speaks truth to us (John 8:45, 14:6, 18:37). When John refers to the Spirit, it is both the Spirit of Jesus and the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26). The Father, Jesus, the Spirit, and the Word are interconnected in John's thinking.

Jesus' teaching was revolutionary for the woman. She did not know a God who could be a Father; and she had no idea she could have a relationship with the Father through Jesus, the Son of God. She knew nothing of the Holy Spirit of God who could live in her and empower her to be a worshiper. She did not have the fullness of the truth of God as revealed in his word beyond the Pentateuch.

Verses 23-24 have important implications for us as we think about our worship life. We cannot separate the presence of Jesus in our worship from what the Holy Spirit contributes to our worship as distinct from what the truth contributes. It is artificial to separate these elements in understanding and defining worship. At Peninsula Bible Church, our vision statement on worship summarizes our worship of God our Father through relationship with Jesus his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit, informed by the truth of his word.

The worship of Messiah

The woman finally recognizes who Jesus is as much as she is able, and then Jesus affirms that he is her Messiah (verse 25):

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Because God is seeking worshipers through relationship with his Son, God initiates with this woman through Jesus. He comes to the well, engages her, and the results are amazing. The woman's openness leads to an embryonic faith and a hope that begins to grow in her that she, too, can enter into worship with a clean conscience, a forgiven heart, and a new spiritual beginning. In verse 28 she reports to the villagers what she experienced:

So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" They went out of the city and were coming to him.

Later, in verse 39 it says,

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

As the conversation progressed, the woman's focus shifted from the externals of worship--the places of worship and the forms of worship--to the central person in worship, Jesus the Christ. Although he knew all the sinful things she had done, he lovingly initiated relationship with her. Her vision of worship is now filled up with Jesus, the Savior of the world and her personal Savior. Her question is answered: Worship is about Jesus. He is the focus.

Let me return to our initial question: Which faction, out of many, are you fighting for in the worship wars? This war has serious spiritual implications. Michael Hamilton writes:

The contemporary proliferation of different worship and music styles may well be the next century's test of our commitment to Christian unity. We seem to have learned charity in regard to differences over mode of baptism, church polity, a number of doctrines.... It is not as clear, however, that we have developed the Christian maturity to deal with the deepening differences over music and worship that are now producing our new sectarianism. (2)

Hamilton later asks the question, "How can we keep our sectarian worship from becoming a sectarianism of the soul?" (3) That is the danger we face. It was also Cain's problem in worship. God's concern was not the form of worship, whether Cain brought a produce offering and Abel brought a lamb. God's concern was spiritual, that Cain's heart motive was wrong. Abel was gratefully focused on a God of providential care, and God found him to be a true worshiper. Cain was focused on externals--on the forms of worship, on his own offering, on his brother, on his brother's offering--everything around him but God. In him God did not find a true worshiper. Frustrated and angry, Cain directed his hatred toward his brother and murdered him. The result is the first casualty of the worship wars.

The good news is that we do not have to end up like Cain, focusing on ourselves and the external forms of worship. We can be delivered from our sinful, sectarian tendencies. Our worship doctrine does not have to be, "I know what I like; I like what I know; I want what I know and like." We can enter into worship of our Father God like the Samaritan woman. We can celebrate the Lord Jesus, who knows us intimately and loves us in spite of the sin in our lives. He is the Messiah, the one who is the Savior of the world and our own personal Savior. He can

fill our vision with himself, replacing any personal issues in worship. We no longer have to fight over the wrong things in worship. Then we can worship in response to Helen Lemmel's invitation,

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face*

And the things of earth
[the things of the flesh, the things of distraction, the things of sectarianism]

*will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace. (4)*

NOTES:

1. Hamilton, Michael S. "The Triumph of the Praise Song." *Christianity Today*, July 12, 1999. PP. 29-30.
2. Hamilton, p. 30.
3. Hamilton, p. 34.
4. Lemmel, Helen H. *Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus*. Singspiration, Inc. 1922, 1950.

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