

Introduction

Several years ago, I attended the worship service of a large Friends Church while I was on vacation. It consisted of the congregation standing and singing choruses for 30 minutes and the pastor preaching for 30 minutes, that's it. After the service was over, two of the people I was with commented that they enjoyed it, especially the choruses. But the other person I was with responded that he didn't enjoy it at all, that he missed singing hymns. He then dogmatically declared, "**That isn't the way to worship.**" Whether he was right or wrong in saying that, he did raise a vital issue that I'm going to preach about today, the way to worship. Turn to John 4:19-24, which teaches us what that is.

Worship

4:1-30 records Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well. Samaritans were a half Jewish/half Gentile people who disagreed with the Jewish people about two things. First, they claimed that the temple they set up on Mount Gerizim, not the one in Jerusalem, was the true temple of God. And second, they rejected all of the Old Testament books, except the Law of Moses (the first five) as God's word. Those two differences made enemies of the Samaritans and Jews.

That explains why the Samaritan woman was surprised in verse 9 that Jesus talked to her. It also explains why she began discussing the topic she did in verse 20, worship.

Ezekiel 44:15 reveals what the essence of worship is. It's ministering to God. I know that sounds odd to a lot of people. After all, He is utterly self-sufficient and needs nothing from anyone or anything including you and me. That's true. But it's also true that His heart isn't made of stone. It is in fact the most sensitive and tender of all. Which helps explain what worship is. It's touching His heart. It's we, finite human beings, moving, pleasing, even delighting the infinite God.

That's a stunning thing that reveals the priority of worship.

Worship comes before work. Ministry to God comes before ministry to man. Our worship reaches not only into heaven but into the very heart of God Himself. That makes it the most significant and noblest thing we do.

Because it is that, we need to make it an habitual part of our lives. I don't know about you but that's how I wake up and go to bed, not praying but worshipping God. I also do it regularly in between as the Spirit and the experiences of life itself lead me to. Almost every time I initially hear thunder, for instance, I think of Psalm 29 and pause to worship God as the almighty. Or when I hear a clock strike, I often pause to worship Him as God the eternal. That's individual worship, which in turn prepares us for our corporate worship on Sunday morning. The Bible makes clear that God wants our worship to be communal as well as individual. So we give Him what He wants by coming here every Sunday morning at 10:45 am. In short, we make worship habitual and communal because it's the most significant and noblest thing we do.

Who Worship Is About

Now that we know what worship is, let's examine who it is about. The opening word of verse 24 tells us. It's about God. It isn't about people, others or us. It's about God. That principle should guide corporate worship services but often doesn't. Christians often violate it by making them primarily about people, not God.

Most pastors are guilty of that. I admit I used to be. I remember it vividly. When I was candidating for the church 23 years ago, I told the Council: **"I believe the primary purpose of our worship service is to inspire people. They're in the world all week long, facing its challenges, and need to be uplifted and filled."** Don't get me wrong. It's good for the people to be uplifted and filled. But that isn't the purpose worship services. Their purpose is just that, to worship.

But it isn't just pastors who make worship services about the people. It's the people themselves as well. Let's face it. Many of us judge the success or failure of a worship service by what it did for us. If we

experienced God's presence and were moved, it was a success. If we didn't, it was a failure. But that isn't the Bible's view. Experiencing God's presence and being moved as we worship is desired and good. But it isn't necessary. The truth is that worship is something we do for Him, not something He does for us. It's about we pleasing Him, not He pleasing us. We should assess our worship services accordingly.

The Way to Worship

To please God of course, we must worship the way He tells us to and that's what we have here in verses 23 and 24, the way to worship.

Verse 24 says, "**God is spirit.**" That means He's non-material. He isn't made up of atoms and molecules like everything in the universe is. He has the highest possible levels of consciousness and activity without a body and brain. He's a spiritual not a physical being in other words.

And we must worship Him in a way that's consistent with that quality of His. That's the meaning of the phrase "**in spirit and in truth.**" The Samaritans had set up a golden calf, and other images that represented God, in their temple on Mount Gerizim. But that was false worship. The images conveyed two things about Him that aren't true. #1 - that He is material not spiritual. And #2 - that He is localized and not everywhere present. That is what the phrase "**in spirit and truth**" alludes to. Its meaning, therefore, is this. Worship according to the nature of God's person and deeds. On the positive side, say and do things that are consistent with who He is and what He has done, is doing or will do. On the negative side, don't say and do things that are inconsistent with that.

I know a pastor who's thinking about having a Browns - Steelers worship service one Sunday morning. Fans dressed in Browns garb would sit on one side of the church and fans dressed in Steelers garb on the other. The theme would be unity in the body of Christ. The question he needs to ask and answer is this. Would the actions involved in it be according to the nature of God's person and deeds?

So that's what the phrase "**in spirit and truth**" means. We worship

God according to the nature of His person and deeds. We say and do things that are consistent with, not contrary to, who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do. That is the way to worship.

Knowing and Worshipping

Now, verse 22 reveals what worshipping that way requires. Jesus was blunt here with the Samaritan woman. He pointed out the consequence of her people rejecting all of the Old Testament books except the first five. They lacked vital knowledge about God and His deeds that those books revealed. That in turn made their worship often inadequate and sometimes even false.

Verse 22 links two things inseparably together – knowledge and worship. Their link is that knowledge is the foundation of worship. The more we know about God and His deeds, the more meaningfully we're able to worship, both individually and corporately. We sing a lovely chorus, *When I Look Into Your Holiness*. I know what holiness means. God is 100% morally pure. There is no evil of any kind in Him. He is incapable of thinking, feeling, or acting wrongly. Knowing that deepens my worship of Him as I sing that song. In my private worship one morning last week, I focused on the incarnation of Jesus. I know that He becoming a man for men was far more sacrificial than I becoming a slug for slugs. Knowing the sacrificial nature of His incarnation deepened my worship of Him. There's no doubt about it. Knowledge is the foundation of worship.

That implies something we need to grasp. Our worship must be rational. The Psalms emphasize that point. Our mind must be engaged in order to worship. That means we concentrate our thoughts on something specific we know about God or His deeds like His holiness or the sacrificial nature of His incarnation. We dwell on the awesomeness of something that He is or that He has done, is doing, or will do.

The Psalms reveal what happens when we do that. It kindles our emotions. Every thought has an accompanying emotion in human life, and in worship. Concentrating our thoughts on God's person or deeds

stirs up a variety of feelings in us, ranging all the way from reverence and awe to excitement and joy. It's a natural consequence of rational worship that it's always emotional as well.

But notice something. The emotions come from the thoughts. It's often the case in public worship services that people are emoting/feeling but not thinking. The source of their excitement and joy isn't their mind but their ambience, usually the music. It's the rhythm and beat of the music, not their thoughts about God or His deeds, that stir them. There isn't anything wrong with that but it isn't worship. Worship occurs when the emotional flows from the rational. That's what should happen.

And it leads to the physical when it does. When we think and feel, we naturally act as well. We give our body its fair share in worship. That certainly includes our tongue. We express verbally to God and/or others what we're thinking and feeling about His person or deeds. But He wants us to involve the rest of our body as well. We do that by putting it in postures that are consistent with what we're thinking and feeling. The Bible reveals what some of those are: kneeling (Psalm 95:6), bowing down (Psalm 95:6), standing (Deuteronomy 29:10,15), clapping hands (Psalm 47:1), lifting hands (Psalm 63:4), lifting up the head and eyes (Psalm 123:1), and one that we Quakers don't do, dancing (Psalm 150:4). Those are all appropriate and even commanded postures. It delights God when we make them part of our worship.

I was in a worship service at a conference when we began singing *When I Look into Your Holiness*. As we got into the chorus, author Richard Foster, who was standing in front of me, moved out into the aisle, knelt down, lifted his eyes, and continued to sing. I could tell by his body language what was happening. He was thinking about God's holiness, which filled him with a sense of reverence and awe, which compelled him to kneel down, lift his eyes, and sing. It was utterly appropriate and delighting to God that he did.

That illustrates the way to worship. Using what we know about God and His deeds, we worship Him with our whole being – rationally,

emotionally, and bodily.

Forms of Worship

Our text teaches a final thing about worship in verse 21. The temples at Jerusalem and Mt. Gerizim employed different methods and forms to worship. Which of those, the Samaritan woman asked in verse 20, constituted true worship? Jesus responded in verse 21 and I amplify what He said: **“This issue will soon be moot/irrelevant. After my death, resurrection, and ascension, true worship won’t be restricted to particular methods, forms, or places. My followers will be free to use any methods and forms that are appropriate and will be free to use them anywhere.”**

Let’s go back to the worship service I attended on vacation. I, like the one person, disliked the format. Standing and singing for 30 minutes hinders my attempt to worship. But singing a blend of choruses and hymns at different points in the service supports it. So which of the two is true worship? The answer is that both are. The Bible doesn’t establish any God-ordained methods and forms of worship. We may sing many choruses or no choruses at all. We may sing many hymns or no hymns at all. We may use musical instruments of all kinds or no instruments at all. We may have a formal liturgy or no liturgy at all. The methods and forms don’t matter as long as they support not hinder worshipping the way we learned – according to the nature of God’s person and deeds, and with our whole being. People are so different in that regard, which is why so many different methods and forms are used.

Conclusion

I close this morning with the words of William Sperry, which capture, I believe, the essence of worship: **“Worship is a deliberate and disciplined adventure in reality.”** I hope and pray that our worship, both individually and corporately, will be just that, an adventure in reality. Let’s follow the Bible’s way to worship. It will be if we do.