

John 4:10-26

Worship Wars

God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth – v. 24.

In our previous studies we've noted how we've been able to trace the spirit of church rivalries all the way back to the time of Christ. We find John's disciples coming to him at the end of chapter 3 and expressing their concern that people were leaving John to follow Christ. And in the beginning of chp. 4 we note how the word was getting out that *Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John* even though Christ Himself didn't baptize anyone but left that task to His disciples.

Now as we come further into chp. 4 and consider the conversation that Christ had with this Samaritan woman at the well we find another modern day phenomenon that can be traced all the way back to the time of Christ. Some Christians refer to this phenomenon as the *worship wars*. Have you ever heard that phrase *worship wars*? The phrase refers to the modern day debates about how worship should be conducted. More often than not it refers to the kind of music that should be allowed in worship services.

A simple Google search on the phrase *worship wars* brings up a number of articles on the internet. Listen to some of the titles to these articles:

5 Ways to Battle the Never Ending Worship Wars

The Worship Wars are Hurting the Church

Have Church Your Way: The High Cost of Worship Wars

Worship Wars – Proposing a Few Ground Rules (Gospel Coalition).

Some solutions include blending the worship service to include some traditional aspects of worship with some modern day styles of worship. Other churches address the issue by advertising a traditional service in the morning and a contemporary service in the afternoon.

I raise the issue of these worship wars this morning because we find this Samaritan woman engaging Christ over the matter of worship. *Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship* she says in v. 20.

Now if you're at all familiar with this passage then you'll know that the reason this woman brings up the issue of worship wasn't necessarily because she had a genuine interest in the subject. She's raising the issue as a diversionary tactic because Christ had just exposed her sin. *Thou hast well said, I have no husband*, Christ says to her in v. 17 and then in the next verse Christ goes on to say *For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly*.

All of a sudden this woman knows that she's in the presence of a man that knows her better than she knows herself. *Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did* she says when she returns to her community and tells them about Christ in v. 29. And

doesn't Christ's action on this occasion remind us that He sees and knows everything? He knows all about you. He knows your thoughts and actions. He knows your strengths and weaknesses and He knows your sins. He knows all about you. And it's when this Samaritan woman comes to experience the all seeing, all knowing Christ, that she tries to utilize the diversionary tactic of changing the subject to worship.

And what I find even more interesting than her attempted diversion is the fact that Christ goes along with it. He doesn't try to hold her feet to the fire, as it were, in the matter of her sinful relationships. And there may be a very definite lesson for us in that when it comes to discerning just how much we need to hold someone's feet to the fire regarding their sin when we're dealing with them.

Christ goes along with her diversion and that's what leads to the discussion between them about worship. And in that discussion we discover that worship wars had been going on for a very long time even before Christ met this woman at the well. Of course, if a person is going to engage the very Son of God on the topic of worship that person should know that Christ can speak authoritatively on the issue. And He doesn't leave the matter as some sort of a speculative or subjective matter that simply boils down to a matter of one's personal style preferences. He's got some very definite ideas about worship.

And so He says to the woman in v. 22 *Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews*. And in the space of just 4 short verses Christ says a lot about the subject of worship. I want you to focus with me this morning, therefore, on what Christ says on the topic of worship in these verses. Here is someone who can and does speak on the subject in such a way that it just may help us to lay some ground rules (if I may borrow the title from an internet article) on the matter of worship wars.

What I want you to see quite simply is:

Christ's Teaching on Worship

Let's note first what Christ has to say on:

I. The Place of Worship

The woman had just pointed out how the Samaritans worshipped at a place commentators point out was Mt. Gerizim. Mt. Gerizim was not without spiritual significance even to the Jews. You may recall from your Old Testament history that the Israelites were instructed in Deut. 27 once they had crossed Jordan to set up an altar of whole stones without touching them with a tool. And upon those stones they were to plaster these stones with plaster and then write the words of the law in that plaster.

The tribes were then to be divided into two groups with one group pronouncing the blessings of the covenant on Mt. Gerizim while the other group would announce the curses from Mt. Ebal. It was upon Mt. Gerizim that the Samaritans eventually built a temple that somewhat resembled the temple at Jerusalem. Matthew Poole, in his commentary gives a

very detailed account of this, borrowing as he does from the ancient Jewish historian Josephus who traces this temple to the days of Nehemiah when the Samaritans were given no place to help the Jews with the construction of the temple at Jerusalem or with the city of Jerusalem itself.

It's interesting to note that Jacob's well that is mentioned in v. 6 could not only be traced all the way back to the time of Jacob, from the time of Christ but can still be found today in the land of Israel and from what I gather can still be drawn from. So the discussion between this Samaritan woman and Christ focuses first on the topic of the place for worship. And before He's done Christ will very definitely state that Jerusalem was indeed the place that God had acknowledged as the place where the temple was to be built and where God was to be worshipped.

Just as this woman was ignorant of who it was that stood before her, she was also ignorant in the matter of worship. *Ye worship ye know not what* Christ says to her in v. 22. But before making that statement, He first makes a very important statement that finds its way to us even at this present hour. Look at the words of v. 21 *Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.*

There was to be no central place for worship once the church age was up and running, as it were. In Old Testament times there were to be a number of occasions where the Jews would have to appear at Jerusalem before the Lord. There would be no such thing under the New Covenant. Rome may try to lay claim to being such a place and the secular world may go along with the delusion but neither Christ nor His Apostles would designate a Christian capital, so to speak.

There is a point, however, that I want to make about Christ's words here, however, because I think His words have been abused in their application especially in such days as we live in today. There are those you see that will take Christ's words here and draw the conclusion from His words that we are basically free to worship God however and wherever we see fit. The church of Jesus Christ has fallen upon hard times these days largely on account of this mindset. Who needs church? – the question goes, when all I need to do is worship God in my own way. I can worship Him by taking a walk in the woods and enjoying the fresh air and nature's scenery – or I can worship Him by sitting at the kitchen table with my cup of coffee in one hand and my Bible and devotional book open before me.

And while it's certainly true that you can worship God in both those ways and indeed I would encourage you to worship God daily in either of those ways. However, don't ever come to the conclusion that because Christ said that *the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father* – don't conclude from that statement that you're under no obligation to gather with those of like precious faith to worship the Lord corporately.

The author of Hebrews makes the case that Christians need each other. So we read those well known verses in Heb. 10:24,25 *And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.* It seems, doesn't it, that it's always been the manner of some to forsake the assembly of the saints but that's never been God's will, alternate Sunday activities notwithstanding.

The author of Hebrews makes it plain that as we draw close to the approaching day, which I take to be judgment day, that the need for Christians to assemble and worship God will become more acute. That's certainly the case in this country at this time when great reproach is being heaped upon those that worship Christ.

So that's the first matter that Christ addresses with the Samaritan woman, the matter of the place of worship. You could say, I think, that the fact of worship, or the practice of worship would very soon become much more important than the place of worship. But before we come to consider the practice of worship, we must first consider what comes next which is:

II. The Prerequisite to Worship

Notice again the words of Christ in v. 22 *Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.* Salvation is the prerequisite to true worship. Salvation is of the Jews because Christ was of the Jews. The whole purpose of the Jewish race was to bring forth the Messiah.

And you may recall what I pointed out in our last study how in this narrative of the woman at the well we find Christ asserting His identity with the greatest clarity that's found in the gospels. *The woman saith unto him, I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: we read in v. 25; when he is come, he will tell us all things.* And then there follows this very direct and plain affirmation that's too clear to miss when we read in v. 26 *Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he.*

Salvation has come because the Messiah has come. And worship, therefore, i.e. true worship cannot take place apart from knowing Jesus the Messiah. Apart from salvation, you see, the same statement that Christ makes to the woman at the well is applicable to all. *Ye worship ye know not what – v. 22.*

You may engage in worship. Indeed I would go so far as to say that the whole world does engage in worship of one kind or another. But apart from Christ you don't know the true state of your soul. And apart from Christ you don't really appreciate where you're headed. And apart from Christ you're spiritually blind and deaf and dead, dead in trespasses and sins. You might impress yourself like the Pharisee in Lk. 18 who impressed himself by comparing himself to others.

God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess (Lk. 18:11,12). Here's a clear case of a man who will hear the Lord say to him on judgment day

I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work iniquity. The publican, on the other hand went down to his house justified. Why? Because he saw himself as a sinner and he knew that the sacrifice offered in the temple pointed to a greater sacrifice to come.

Salvation is of the Jews Christ says and because Christ has come salvation has been accomplished by His life and death. He has fulfilled the law and He has paid the penalty that sin calls for and to those who have their eyes opened to their sin and opened to the truth of Christ, they can't help but worship God through Christ. Like doubting Thomas later in John's gospel they find themselves compelled to confess in worship *My Lord and my God.*

Or like the healed lame man in Acts 3 they find themselves *walking and leaping and praising God.* I hope you've come to God's house this morning in that kind of spirit. Not that we're looking for people to actually stand up and jump around, although, mind you, if the Spirit of God visited us all and so led us, who would want to suppress it? But what I have in mind is a walking and leaping and praising that takes place in your heart where you say – *thank God for Jesus Christ – thank God for sins forgiven – thank God for everlasting life – thank God for delivering me from the hell I deserve and for adopting me into His family. Lord, I thank thee and praise thee and worship thee for thou art worthy to receive all praise and glory and honor.*

Salvation then, is the prerequisite to true worship. Until you're saved, you're in the dark and you know not what you worship. With salvation you worship with the right understanding of who Christ is and what He's done for sinners.

Let's move on in our analysis to consider next what Christ says about:

III. The Practice of Worship

Christ makes this a much more important issue than the place of worship. Notice the words of vv. 23,24 *But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*

Do you see how Christ utilizes the phrase *true worshippers*? His use of that phrase certainly suggests, doesn't it, that not all worshippers are true worshippers or that there's such a thing as true worship and false worship.

Man in his pride may think that he does God a favor by worshipping at all and if he worships at all then God ought to be grateful for it. He condescends to throw God a bone, so to speak, and then thinks that God ought to be satisfied with it. True worshippers, on the other hand will see fit to worship God as God directs.

And you'll notice that Christ puts forth a theological foundation for true worship to take place. That foundation is found in the words *God is a Spirit.* We're faced in this statement with the truth of what could be called *the transcendence of God.* Because He is a Spirit He is far above and beyond us. He is incomprehensible. That's basically the theology of the book of Job. Job didn't understand God's dealings with him and would go so far in his

pride as to think that God owed him an explanation for his dealings with him. People who read the book of Job in search of that explanation miss the point of the book. The point of the book is that God is far above and beyond us. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways higher than our ways. And once God actually drew near to Job, Job realized his foolishness and repented.

Because God is a Spirit and is revealed to be clothed in a light that makes Him unapproachable by men, it becomes His prerogative to direct His creatures how they must worship Him. And when Christ says and then repeats the statement that God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth then we can mark it down with strong assurance that not just any worship will do.

I take the statement that we must worship Him in spirit to mean we must worship Him wholeheartedly. After all the first and greatest commandment is that we love the Lord our God with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength. It stands to reason that we must worship Him the way we love Him. He is worthy to be praised with all our hearts and the fact that He is a Spirit and is majestic in holiness and fearful in praises means that half hearted and sleepy worship is an abomination to Him. You could say that God hates boring worship more than we do. And the way to overcoming boring worship is to gain greater and fuller knowledge of the very person we do worship.

And would you notice in Christ's words (and I have to admit that I never saw this until I read a sermon on this passage) how Christ directs worship toward God the Father. It becomes very important in our worship that we worship the right person – *the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father*. Now I realize and gladly affirm that we are Trinitarians. We believe in One God in three persons and that each person is the same in substance, equal in power and glory according to our shorter catechism.

I read an article some while back in which the author was complaining that Christians are not sufficiently grounded in their knowledge of the Trinity and as a result they become vague and ambiguous in their worship, attributing things to one person of the Trinity that ought to be primarily attributed to another person of the Trinity. This apostle was suggesting that a thorough knowledge of the Apostles creed would go a long way in helping us worship in truth.

The point that Christ is making to this woman and that He in turn makes to us is that His Father is to be worshipped. And of course we realize, don't we, that apart from Christ we have no access to the Father, so Christ is to be worshipped also. And apart from the Spirit we would have no true knowledge of Christ so the Holy Spirit is to be worshipped as well.

Our worship, then, must be in spirit and in truth. I think the term *spirit* conveys to us the subjective element of our worship, which means what I just said that God is to be worshipped with all our hearts. While the term *truth* conveys to us the objective element to our worship which means that God is to be worshipped in accordance with the truth of His Word.

As confessional Presbyterians we affirm what is sometimes called the Regulative Principle of worship. This is a principle that states simply that we must have scriptural warrant for every part of our worship. We have preaching in our worship services because we believe there is scriptural warrant for preaching in our worship. And we pray because we believe there is scriptural warrant for our praying in our worship. And we sing – we sing Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs because we’re commanded to use Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs in our worship.

The regulative principle of worship stands in contrast to the Lutheran principle referred to as the normative principle. This principle is wider in its latitude and says basically that anything is allowed in worship unless it is prohibited by the word of God. The regulative principle approaches worship in a narrower way and I believe Christ’s words in our text call for that narrow way of worship. We’re to worship in spirit and in truth – which means we’re to worship with all our hearts and we’re to be governed in our worship by the word of God.

So I hope you can see how in the space of a few verses in this portion of John’s gospel Christ has quite a bit to say on the subject of worship. He addresses the place of worship and He addresses the prerequisite to worship and He addresses the practice of worship. Let me say a word finally about:

IV. The Priority of Worship

Look with me at v. 23, paying close attention to the end of the verse. *But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.*

The Father is very much interested in true worshippers. He seeks them. You could say that the purpose behind salvation is to create them. The book of Revelation makes that clear. In the very last book of the Bible we’re taken up into heaven and we view scenes that are incredible to behold. And we see a lot of activity in heaven and that activity is worship.

Rev. 4:10,11 *The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.*

In this chapter God is worshipped as the Creator. In the next chapter the Lamb of God is worshipped as the Redeemer of God’s people. It thrills my soul to gain this view of heavenly worship when we read in Rev. 5:8-14

And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. 9 And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; 10 And hast made us

unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. 11 And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; 12 Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. 13 And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. 14 And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

There are skeptics you know that criticize God for being what they mistakenly think is so self centered. They wonder why God would be so vain when really they themselves are the ones that are vain. I read some time ago a very well written explanation of this criticism of God.

“We may conclude that the pleasure of God in his Son is pleasure in himself. Since the Son is the image of God and the radiance of God and the form of God, equal with God, and indeed is God, therefore God’s delight in the Son is delight in himself. The original, the primal, the deepest, the foundational joy of God is the joy he has in his own perfections as he sees them reflected in the glory of his Son. Paul speaks of “the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). From all eternity God had beheld the panorama of his own perfections in the face of his Son. All that he is he sees reflected fully and perfectly in the countenance of his Son. And in this he rejoices with infinite joy.

At first this sounds like vanity. It would be vanity if we humans found our deepest joy by looking in the mirror. We would be vain and conceited and smug and selfish if we were like God in this regard. But why? Aren’t we supposed to imitate God (Matthew 5:48; Ephesians 5:1)? Yes, in some ways. But not in every way. This was the first deceit of Satan in the Garden of Eden: He tempted Adam and Eve to try to be like God in a way that God never intended them to be like him—namely, in self-reliance. Only God should be self-reliant. All the rest of us should be God-reliant. In the same way, we were created for something infinitely better and nobler and greater and deeper than self-contemplation. We were created for the contemplation and enjoyment of God! Anything less than this would be idolatry toward him and disappointment for us. God is the most glorious of all beings. Not to love him and delight in him is a great loss to us and insults him.

But the same is true for God. How shall God not insult what is infinitely beautiful and glorious? How shall God not commit idolatry? There is only one possible answer: God must love and delight in his own beauty and perfection above all things.²³ For us to do this in front of the mirror is the essence of vanity; for God to do it in front of his Son is the essence of righteousness.”

(Piper, John. *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God*)

It is because of who God is and who Christ is that God seeks those that will worship Him in spirit and in truth. This, therefore, becomes characteristic for the Christian. There's a statement that Paul makes in his epistle to the Philippians that makes for a good cross reference to Jn. 4:24.

Php 3:3 For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.

Isn't that a good description of the true people of God? They worship God with all their hearts and they rejoice in Christ Jesus. True worship, then, cannot be true worship without the heart of the worshipper being filled with the joy of Christ. And because of what we know of Christ and what we know of ourselves we're not so foolish as to place any confidence in the flesh.

It's no wonder that when this woman at the well tried to use the subject of worship as a diversionary tactic, Christ allowed her to get away with it. He followed her diversion because He had much to say in just a few words about worship. I hope you catch the drift of His meaning this morning. And equally important, I hope you find yourselves compelled to worship Him who is altogether lovely and altogether worthy of our praise.