

## Worship: Form or Substance?

*Christ the Controversialist*

By Dr. Liam Goligher

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** John 4

**Preached on:** Sunday, August 17, 2014

### **Tenth Presbyterian Church**

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

**Website:** [www.tenth.org](http://www.tenth.org)

**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/tenth](http://www.sermonaudio.com/tenth)

Our text for the sermon this morning is in the Gospel of John 4. This can be found in the black pew Bibles in front of you on page 889. Again, the text this morning is going to be in the Gospel of John 4. I'm going to read verses 19-26.

19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

This is the word of God.

Keep your Bibles open at this passage in John 4. As we've been going through these summer weeks looking at some of the controversies and controversial subjects that Jesus addressed, we come this morning to look at the subject of worship and worship is addressed by Jesus in probably the most controversial of contexts, that is in a conversation with a woman who was worshiping God in a way which Jesus disapproved of and which Jesus disqualified.

We come, of course, to the subject of worship probably disagreeing among ourselves as to how to define the word "worship." In the evangelical world today, there are various definitions or descriptions that are available. For example, there is a school of thought that began in Australia and it's been infecting other parts of the world which says that worship is not a corporate event; it's not a corporate gathering like this. Worship is something you do everywhere, every day, in everything and your life is your worship and

you offer your entire life to God and corporate gatherings are not part in any special way a part, of what worship is.

For others, worship is a very pragmatic approach to what we do whenever we're together as Christian people. I think general evangelicalism is probably characteristic of this. It's pragmatic. That is, you can make it up as you go along, church is reinvented every Sunday. Doing something different, introducing new elements goes without saying and worship is up for grabs. Another definition of worship is probably the most common today if you were to ask any group of people what does the word "worship" make you think about? I did a test run this morning and was not disappointed. The response will be something like this: it will either be, "Well, it's praise or it's singing or it's music." That would be what would happen. I remember going to speak to university groups and they would tell me when I arrived, "We're going to have a period of worship and then you're on." What they meant was that they were going to have 40 minutes of singing and then I was up from my five minute talk or something to that effect. Worship is equated with music.

Then there's a view of worship that equates it with the practices of the Old Testament. Here I'm thinking of some of the great formulistic, ritualistic churches that have forgotten or it seems that it hasn't dawned on them or they are in disagreement with the fact that we've actually moved from the Old Testament way of worship into the New Testament and so there are still altars and there are still sacrifices even though they maybe bloodless sacrifices but they are kind of stuck in a time warp in the Old Testament.

Then for many, many people, corporate worship is really just an extension of their own personal devotional life. In my own personal devotional life, I may pray but I pray to Jesus about me and it's kind of "Jesus and me, for each tomorrow, For every heartache and every sorrow." It's just Jesus and me. That's the way I operate. Then people come to corporate gatherings like this and they think this is an extension of that personal devotional life. They really want to pray for themselves, for their needs, for their prayer concerns and so on and it's very much an individualistic thing and nowhere is that fed more than in those songs that are sung by congregations or groups of people in which the language is all about him and me, you and me, rather than we and us.

Now, would it surprise you if I were to tell you that in light of all of those possibilities, that from a biblical perspective, every one of those definitions, every one of those definitions is wrong biblically. Wrong. The Samaritans worshiped. Naturally they worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that her worship was wrong and that's what brings us into this passage today. I don't want to say too much about it because I preached on the passage recently. I don't want to preach the same sermon. I'm revisiting it simply to pick out what Jesus teaches about worship here. Let me remind you that what happens here happens by divine necessity. Back in verse 4, Jesus "had to go through Samaria." The word translated "had" there is a necessity word and wherever it's used in John's Gospel and elsewhere in the New Testament, it has to do with divine necessity. It was driven by the will of God, by divine necessity, Jesus had to go through Samaria. He had a divine appointment there with this woman. He had a

divine purpose in being there. He was fulfilling the plan and purpose of God. This was part of a bigger picture and here is Jesus, the submissive Servant but also the Son of God, responding in this situation and coming to this woman.

You know the story about the woman. She has lived an immoral life and yet Jesus comes to talk to this lady who has had no particular theological education but he talks to her about the highest, loftiest theological subject that you could possibly imagine. I think it's very interesting that Jesus should do this with a woman who is normally invisible in public worship, to an immoral woman who would normally be disqualified from public worship, to a Samaritan woman whose way of worship up to this point has not been pleasing to God though it may have been pleasing to them. It is a remarkable thing that Jesus should have this set piece encounter by divine necessity with this woman. The only parallel kind of experience in the Gospel of John has been in chapter 3 where Jesus has a set piece encounter with a theologian, a rabbi, one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem there with Nicodemus. He teaches him about the new birth. Then in this event with this woman of Samaria, he teaches us about worship. He introduces to the woman her need for living water, real deep satisfaction that goes beyond the normal. He offers her living water. She thinks in literalistic terms and asks if she could drink that water, wherever it was, could drink it forever. She asks him, "Are you greater than our father, Jacob, who dug this well that we're going to draw real water from? Are you greater than Jacob?" In response to that, Jesus exposes her need. He tells her to go and get her husband. She says, "I have no husband." Jesus shows her how much he knows about her. "You are right in saying that you have no husband, you have had five husbands and the man you are with now is not your husband at all." It's that that leads the woman to come to the conclusion, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

That's where we begin. "You are a prophet." The Samaritans may have thrown out very much of the Old Testament but here was one part of the Old Testament they believed: the book of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. In the book of Moses, Moses had promised that in the last days God would send a prophet like Moses and as this woman listens to Jesus she thinks to herself, "This man knows more than anybody else could possibly have come up with on their own. He doesn't know me from a radish and yet he knows all about me. He knows the deepest things about me." And she perceives he is a prophet and she wonders to herself, "Could this be the prophet? And if you are the prophet, what's your view on the worship wars between the Jews and the Samaritans?" She says to the man, she says to Jesus, "I need to know the answer to this question because how I worship determines whether I am saved or not. How I worship has a part to play in the bigger picture of my relationship with God so what is the right thing? Here in Gerizim, in Samaria or there in Jerusalem and Judea?"

Now she sets us a good example this morning because she asks Jesus the question. Rather than simply setting up a committee to decide how we should worship, she goes straight to the horse's mouth. She goes straight to the author's mouth and asks him the question. I want you to notice what underlies her question is this: what kind of worship is acceptable to God? What is pleasing to God? And I want to say to us this morning that is a question that is almost never asked today. Was the worship aesthetically pleasing? Was the

worship emotionally satisfying? Was the worship professionally excellent? Those are the questions we ask today and those are three questions that you will never find asked anywhere in the Bible. Anywhere in the Bible. Because guess what? We don't get to decide what is acceptable worship to God. We don't get to decide what pleases God, he tells us what pleases him. And what pleases him may not please me. What is acceptable to him may not be acceptable to me. So Jesus begins as he addresses this woman's question which has as its sub text: what worship is acceptable to God? "Is it what we do here in Samaria? Is it what you do in Jerusalem? Tell me the answer?" Here is Jesus' answer, he says, "If you're going to understand proper worship, you need to know that there is a right and proper hour of worship." He's not talking about 11 o'clock on Sunday morning, he's talking about an hour in the sense of the bigger picture of God's purposes in the world. John has been concerned to show this in this Gospel. Starting in chapter 2, he sees Jesus going into the temple in Jerusalem and cleaning the temple, purifying it, throwing out everything that was being done there that was an innovation or an addition are an intrusion. He casts it all out and there in that temple, he introduces himself to the people and he says, "Destroy this temple," pointing to his own body, "and I will raise it up again in three days." In other words, Jesus has begun his public ministry by redefining the locus of where you and I encounter and meet God, that it is no longer in the physical temple in Jerusalem, rather it is in Jesus Christ himself. From now on, you'll be worshiping God not if you're in the temple, but if you are in Christ.

So he says to this woman, "Woman, the hour is coming." That matrix. That time. That dispensation. That era has come and is now arrived. It is now here. The hour of the revelation of the Son of God, the hour of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God, the hour of the Ascension and session at the right hand of God's Son. The hour of fulfillment of all the prophecies, of all the practices of the Old Testament, that hour has come. When he says to this woman, "The hour has come but it won't be in Jerusalem or on this mountain, Gerizim, that you will worship the Father," he is saying to this woman, "From now on, the location is unimportant. From now on the location is to be in a different place and you can worship anywhere in any context. No longer is it a temple. No longer is it a building in a particular location. There are no sanctuaries anymore except the sanctuary of being in Christ Jesus himself."

We need to remind ourselves of the hour that we are in. We are in the hour between Christ's coming and Christ coming back. We are in a New Testament period. What that meant was, "The way you did worship up to now has ended," Jesus is saying to this woman. "Whether here in Samaria or there in Jerusalem, everything is changing now. This is a new period in the history of redemption." God is taking us forward. What that means for the church is this: those who tried to live pre-Christ with a sacrificing priesthood and altars and sacrifices, even bloodless sacrifices on altars, are living pre-Jesus. They are living in a pre-Christian environment. They are trying to create a pre-Christian kind of worship that is unacceptable to him. Jesus says to this woman, "Remember where you are in the history of redemption. You are in the Christian era now. You have come to that place where everything has been fulfilled, everything has come to fruition. The drama of the past is now completed in the drama of redemption on the cross."

There is a proper hour of worship. Secondly, there is a proper way of worship. Jesus anchors what he has to say to this woman in what has been revealed, especially what is revealed in the Judeo-Christian revelation. Look at verse 22. He's talking straight to this lady. You think, "Jesus, could you not be just a bit more gentle with her? You already exposed her past that you knew all about to her and now you're telling her that what she's been doing going to church all these years is wrong." Notice what he says to her, "You worship what you do not know." Now I want you to get that. What is the distinguishing thing between Jerusalem worship and Samaria worship? It isn't, get this, it has nothing to do with what the worshipers feel about their worship experience. Whether it moves them. Whether they are taken somewhere by it. Whether they are transported to some height of existential experience or mystical connection. It has nothing to do with feeling. It has nothing to do as Sinclair Ferguson one said with aesthetics. It has to do with adoration. It has to do with what you know. He's saying to this woman, "You are worshipping and you may be enjoying your worship and you may be even characterizing the different religions, what they do in Jerusalem, what they do in Samaria and you prefer the Samaritan church to the Jerusalem church but I want you to know that you are worshipping not according to what has been revealed by God." That was particularly the case with this woman because the Samaritans did not believe in most of the Old Testament. They did not believe in the prophets from Moses onwards. They just discounted that so they weren't living by the book. They believed some of the Bible but not all of the Bible.

That's why he goes on to say, do you notice he goes on to challenge her and to say, "Salvation is of the Jews. Because God has kept on revealing things that you have been discounting. You are not worshipping by the book. You're not worshipping in a knowing sense. You're getting something out of it but it is not true worship because true worship is connected with what you know." That's why in Romans 12 when Paul is talking about true worship, he talks about the renewing of your mind. You are transformed by the renewing of your mind. This is how we offer acceptable worship to God. It has to do with what you know with your mind, not your feelings. You know, sometimes you go to church and people kind of give you this impression that unless you're feeling happy and clappy and dancing and so on that you're not ready to worship yet. You go there and you think to yourself, "Actually, I was fighting with my wife on the way here in the car. I was arguing with the children as we came in. I didn't get my coffee yet. I missed it because when I went back there for a coffee, the things were empty yet again and you try to get a doughnut in there and those children are adept at getting in there when the donuts appear. I feel miserable. I just don't feel very happy, clappy this morning. Thank you very much." Have you ever felt like that when you go to church? I want to tell you this morning, if you're miserable this morning and some of you obviously are, it doesn't matter if you're miserable either. Be miserable to the glory of God. Be happy to the glory of God.

Worship has nothing to do with these other things. It has to do with what you know. Jesus says there is a proper way of worship and it is to be intelligent worship and it's to be in congregational worship. Jesus says the Father is looking for plural worshipers. Worshipers. It's vitally important in worship that you understand truth. Jesus says to this

woman, "It's all right, dear. I know that you don't agree with the Jews down the road there with me because that bit of the Bible, you don't have that bit of the Bible. It's okay because you're sincere and your heart is in the right place and you are worshiping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob so that bit is okay. It's all right." Well, Jesus doesn't say that to her. He says, "Dear, salvation is of the Jews. You are way wrong here. There is no salvation if you don't believe the revelation that God has given." In other words, what he's saying about worship, he's saying about our public worship as he says about absolutely everything else in our lives: worship is something which God has revealed. In the confessions of our church, we talk about the regulative principle that we should not admit into worship anything that has not been commanded by God and that confession is merely restating what Jesus is saying to this woman. You can disobey God by omission or commission, by adding on or by subtracting from the worship of God.

He's challenging this woman about the way that she does worship and the way others do worship. If we apply that to the modern church, let me put it like this, the Samaritans worshiped wrongly because they set up another worship center in competition to the worship center in Jerusalem. In the medieval church, they set up the drama of the mass mostly because the crowds had stopped coming and the pagans temples were far more popular and so the Christians had to do something dramatic and something compelling and appealing to the eye and to the senses and so there was all the dress and the color and the drama and so on in order to get people back. That was far more interesting than preaching dull sermons that sent children to sleep apparently as we said earlier on. I always thought it was therapy on my part, but anyway.

The mistake of the modern church has to set up a competitor for the preaching of the Gospel. Music. Isn't it interesting. Isn't it interesting that what we fight over, not we and our church because we all agree, but I'm talking about the evangelical world, what we fight over are things that have no biblical basis. No biblical basis. We fight about music. There is nothing in the New Testament about music. There are one or two references to singing but we don't know if that's public singing or it's just private devotional singing. At the time of the Reformation do you know what they did? They threw out the altars and the statues and the crucifixes and the organs and the masses. They threw them all out together because they found no biblical basis for them. And it took nearly 400 years to get an organ back in the church. In the 1860s they are still arguing in Presbyterian and Reformed churches in North America about whether it is legitimate to introduce this innovation. Goodness sakes. Now while I believe in musical instruments in church, can I say this to you? It is a very tenuous argument for it. I think we've got it but it's a tenuous argument for it. Therefore we should be humble about it. But it's interesting, isn't it? That what we fight about are the things that don't have warrant and command from Jesus. We talk about them as the circumstances of worship: buildings, instruments and so on. In fact, you know something, we were even fighting about whether to have hymns in the church because we were still singing Psalms until about 150 years ago and then we started singing human hymns which seemed to be radical. They were uninspired hymns.

Well, there's a proper way of worship and that way is according to the book. The Bible tests whether our worship is right or wrong. Thirdly, there is a proper object of worship.

This is where Jesus is heading. This is where he's going. "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." Can I say that? We don't come seeking God, God comes looking for us. He comes looking for boys and girls, men and women, to make worshipers out of them. A believer is a worshiper. That's what he's come to make. The Father is seeking such people to worship him.

Then he goes on to define who the "him" is: God is Spirit, that is, God the Father. And those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. He is saying this, "Here is the test of your worship. Not about whether we're all pleased with it are not. It is who are we worshipping?" And Jesus says that God, not just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the proper object and subject of worship. You notice the worship is of God because the Father is seeking people to be worshipers. The worship is for God. That is, when I come to worship God, it really doesn't matter whether I like it or not. Some people come here and they don't like the hymns and they go somewhere else because they don't like the hymns. You don't like it, tough. We don't come here for what we like, we come here for God. Worship is for God. There is actually only one audience when it comes to worship and it's not me and it's not you. It's God because the third thing is that worship is to God. It is directed to God. The chief end of God is God and the chief end of man is to glorify God forever for from him and through him and to him are all things, to whom be glory forever and ever.

"The hour is coming when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." What is the new thing that Jesus is talking about here? Some people say the spirit and truth there are sincerity and truthfulness. But those things were always the way in which God required the worship of his people. Back in the Old Testament, God requires that his people's heart attitude should be sincere rather than hypocritical, that worship should be internal, not just external, not just the sacrifices but the heart. Not just what you do in the exterior but what you are inside. Is your heart for God or is it not? But I want you to notice that Jesus is teaching this woman high theology when he speaks to her. What is this new thing? Is this new thing that worship is the worship of the Father? I don't know if that went right over the head of the Samaritan woman or not. It would have been highly unusual for Jesus to refer to God in this language, in this way. But of course, implied in that is this: that God has been revealed to us as you would see if you read on in chapter 5 of John's Gospel. God has revealed himself to us in this new covenant as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Son of the Father. He is the eternal Son of the Father. Not only that, but he makes us sons of God too, heirs of God. Men or women, he makes us sons of God in the sense that we all get the inheritance. We all get the prize, you understand. In the baptism, Jesus was called the beloved Son of God. He talks about the temple as his Father's house. He shares with the Father and he tells us in chapter 5, giving life, raising the dead, judging the world. He has life in himself just like his Father.

The new thing about this era is that we worship God, the Father of the Lord Jesus. And we worship him in the environment of the Spirit and by the Spirit he doesn't mean sincerity. The word *pneuma* that is used here is used 99% of the time in John's Gospel of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Only twice may it refer to the human

spirit. But in the context, let's read this in its context. You go a chapter earlier, chapter 3, and Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus and saying that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. That is, the Holy Spirit gives you new birth and brings you into the realm of God and God is a Spirit. He brings you into the spiritual realm. You are able to operate not just on the carnal, physical, temporal level that you're sitting on those hard pews in but you're able to operate in the spiritual realm communicating with God.

Then he comes to this woman and just before he comes to her at the end of chapter 33, we're told Jesus gives the Spirit without measure and he comes to this woman offering to give her, using the same language, living water. In chapter 7, he explains that this living water is the Spirit whom those who believe in him were to receive. And the Spirit who is the Spirit of Jesus is called the Spirit of truth in chapter 15. So the Spirit that he will send to be in his people and with his people is the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Jesus who is the truth. In John's Gospel, grace and truth come through Jesus Christ. They come through him because he is the exegesis of God. He displays who God is. He demonstrates who God is. No one has ever seen God but the only God who was at the Father's side, he has made him known. In chapter 8, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free and if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. He is the truth. He says that explicitly, chapter 14, "I am the truth." One of the deepest burdens in our Lord's heart during his last hours was to help his disciples understand God's being as Trinity. And in chapter 17 in that great high priestly prayer, he is bringing us into that relationship of love. The Father has always loved the Son. The Son has always loved the Father. We're brought into that relationship in the spiritual realm by the help and power of the Holy Spirit.

Now you understand why it is that we worship God now not in Jerusalem or Samaria. Not in some geographical location or in an architectural building. We worship God today in the temple that has Christ as the Holy of Holies and the people of God are like the building blocks that are building this structure in which Christ dwells by his Spirit. Professor Greg Beale puts it like this, "The place is extended. Worship happens where there are worshipers in the sphere of the promised Spirit and the end time truth that has come in Christ." Now you see, he's teaching this to a non-theologically trained, renegade Samaritan woman which tells you something about worship. It tells you that in worship, it doesn't matter what you come in with. It doesn't matter what you have attached to your persona by letters after your name or by your position in the world. When it comes to understanding the worship of God, when it comes to understanding God, it just takes a creature who may be also a sinner and by the power of the Holy Spirit, things that were above the intellectual heavyweight Nicodemus become understandable and graspable in the heart of a very ordinary person. A very ordinary person.

I remember a church where I was a minister and there was a man who was a well known professor at Glasgow University and he'd sit in the gallery and in the front row there was a man who had left school when he was 12 and had been a gangster and couldn't write and couldn't read and his wife took notes for him. Every word I said, they took notes and they would go over it at the lunch table and the professor said that he could never understand a word that I said. It was probably the English, he couldn't understand because of the accent but no it wasn't that. He didn't understand a word that I said. This

man without any education, he understood everything. Do you know what that's down to? It's down to the Spirit of God. As a proper object of worship and that object of worship is the Triune God.

You see, worshipping the Trinity is not something you can just take home and use Monday morning in the office. Sinclair Ferguson addresses this question. He says, "What can you do as a result of hearing preaching that emphasizes God as Trinity?" Well, at least inwardly if not outwardly, you can fall down and prostrate yourself in worship before the God whose being is so ineffable, so incomprehensible to my mental math that he seeks fellowship with me. You see, the Father is seeking worshipers. Do you know what that means to you? That means God wants you here. He not only summons us as his people, he wants you here to worship him because he wants you to know him, which is why he takes a big chunk out of the service to be heard, speaking to you from his word.

The Father is seeking worshipers and here's the effect, the proper effect of worship. Worship like this even when it's mind-stretching, mind-blowing as it would've been to this woman, the proper effect of worship is to bring you to Jesus. "These things," said Jesus about his word, "are they that testify about me." When we're worshipping, the darkness vanishes and light dawns. It did for this woman. The woman said to him, "I know that when the Messiah comes he will tell us all things." Jesus says to her, "I who am speaking to you. I am he." Isn't that amazing? He reveals himself to this woman. He says explicitly to her but he does not say explicitly to the others because he had come looking for worshipers and worship leads you to Jesus.

So what do you think worship is? Is it something that we do when we're singing? Whether to a guitar or an organ? Is it just something to do with the aesthetics, you have to be in a special building that looks as nice as ours does? We're really grateful that this building looks as nice as it does but our worship is no better for that. Is our worship better because we have really top-notch musicians who play to accompany our singing? That actually doesn't even register in the heavenly calculation. What is acceptable and pleasing to God? It's whether you know God the Trinity. Whether you are worshipping God the Triune. Whether you have come in order that you might forget about yourself and forget about what pleases or displeases you. Forget about the exteriors and you want to get to the heart of worship which is Christ and lift him up. Lift him up. "Don't confuse aesthetics with adoration," Sinclair Ferguson said.

Well, here was an encounter, wasn't it? This was a heavy encounter between Jesus and this woman and in this you might say, it was uneven: he was the Son of God talking to a woman of Samaria. But you know the end of the story. The end of the story is that this woman of Samaria sees it. She gets it. She goes off to her people in town and she says, "Come and see this man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah? Could this be the Messiah?" They came and they saw him and they said, "You know, people say that he is the Savior of the world. He is the Savior of the world."

Let's pray.

*Father, it is the most amazing thing to us that you should seek creatures as we are, mortal though we may be, sinners that we undoubtedly are, that you should seek people like us as you sought the woman of Samaria to become worshipers of you. If we're going to be true worshipers, then our minds need to be informed by revelation and not by speculation or innovation or tradition in the wrong sense but governed by what the word of God says. So we come to you through Jesus by the power of the Spirit. We come to you asking that our worship would be informed by your word that we would read the Bible, sing the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, so that the language that we use and the way that we think is fashioned and shaped by Scripture, by your word. We pray, Lord, as we leave here today, we might leave with a sense that isn't it amazing that we have been sought out by you by necessity. You have found us and you have brought us here today to hear your word and to say to us that you, our heavenly Father, are seeking worshipers, people like us. That we might get to know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Hear our prayers we ask in your Son's strong name. Amen.*