

## WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

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When our Saviour sat on Sychar's well, He spoke to a woman who had been five times married and now living with a "partner" (John 4:16-18). He brought her guilt to light as the Saviour she needed (verse 14). However, avoiding the discomfort, she raised a disputed matter – "where men ought to worship" (verse 20). Worship was controversial then as now. The Samaritans and the Jews disagreed over the sacred place for it, the former saying it should be on Mount Gerizim, the Jews that it should be at Jerusalem.

### **Manner of worship**

This tactic of "changing the subject" when the word comes too close is age-old. However, the Lord did not brush this distraction aside. He patiently answered her question, but not in the way she wanted. He made it clear that sacred places for worship is not the point - the *manner* of worship is,

"Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father ... 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" (verses 21,23,24).

The woman's first need was afterwards met (verse 29), but in doing so our Lord has met a wider need for us. His teaching about worship goes to the heart of it. That the Being of God is spiritual, and therefore all acceptable worship must be spiritual: "in spirit and in truth." Our Saviour's word brings us back to first things.

### **Meaning**

However, what does "in spirit and in truth" mean? Many see in it a licence for freedom in the externals of worship. As if the Lord allows the outward to be left to us as long as the inward criterion is met. But that can hardly be our Lord's meaning given He mentions the worship offered at Jerusalem. In the temple there, worship was minutely regulated and could not be offered according to the worshippers' will. It would be strange if gospel worship were not regulated also, and as we shall see later, it certainly is.

As to the meaning of "in spirit and in truth," is it not an echo of Isaiah 66:2 "to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word"? Here through the prophet, Jehovah refers to the second temple, and warns against overplaying this building and confining Him to an earthly shrine. This is important because the chapter looks also to gospel times, when, like our Saviour's words, true worship will be inward, "to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word." Notice the similarity between Jesus and Isaiah,

Jesus: "in spirit"

Isaiah: "contrite spirit"

Jesus: "in truth"

Isaiah: "trembleth at my word."

Therefore, we have a condition of spirit, and reverence for scripture. The parallel is even there concerning the Lord's desire for such worshippers:

Jesus: "the Father seeketh such to worship him"

Isaiah: "to this man will I look."

Let us now apply this principle to our consideration of worship.

### **1. Spiritual/ biblical worship has suffered in our generation.**

We live in restless and questioning times. The cumulative effect of Evolution dogma has removed from peoples' minds the verities and absolutes of the past. The prevailing notion is that nothing is necessarily fixed and unalterable now. Everything, in every area of thought and life, can be open to reevaluation.

That our secular and humanist society has lost its bearings should not surprise us. What *does* surprise us is to see the extent to which the spirit of the age has crept in to evangelical and reformed churches. Fifty years ago, there was a consensus over the character of divine worship - nowadays it is a subject for endless reappraisal and debate. We too have lost our bearings.

The catalyst for change came with the Charismatic Movement. When this erupted in the 1960s,<sup>1</sup> it challenged every accepted norm. However, the impact of this movement is not confined to the churches it has conquered. Its influence has gone far beyond, and like the spirit of the age it represents,<sup>2</sup> it visited upon many churches the same loss of fixedness and certainty. One thing after another came up for grabs, but particularly the character of worship. There is an irony in this. Charismatic worship claims to restore the inward dimension to worship because of its superior claims regarding the Holy Spirit. Yet it manifests a "spirit" that has little time for scripture-regulated norms. A typical example of this contrasts historic and new worship:

"... evangelical tradition that centres on the Word preached. Our work as the congregation was to listen, to stand under the Bible's authority, and to accept its words as words to us. Today our form of worship is charismatic and Pentecostal, so today's ground rules are different ... Our work today as honorary Charismatics is to celebrate that freedom ... for worshiping in Spirit and in truth ... I like to call charismatic worship 'full-body worship,' a worship of heart and mind and soul and strength. We *go crazy* when we think about all God has done for us and with us."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The "Charismatic Renewal" is usually dated from April 3, 1960. On this Sunday Father Dennis Bennett, an Episcopal priest Mark's Church, Van Nuys, California, publicly announced to his parishioners that he had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. His claims were subsequently published in *Nine O'clock in the Morning* (Bridge-Logos, 1970). The movement spread to the UK and was promoted by influential Anglican evangelicals, including Michael Harper and David Watson. See <http://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/statementoffaith.html> for the Bible League's cessationist position re the Charismatic Movement.

<sup>2</sup> See the Bible League web site for my article that develops this:

<http://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/articles/understanding.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.westmont.edu/~work/lectures/charismaticchapel.html>

In other words, "the Word preached" was inhibiting, but the Holy Spirit has liberated them. This is to set the Spirit *over against* scripture and is typical of charismatic thinking. However, the reality is "in spirit *and* in truth." The Holy Spirit will always lead us to the utmost reverence for, and subjection to, His Word – even to "tremble" at it (Isaiah). Tragically, many formerly sound churches, while rejecting charismatic doctrine, have conceded to its assumptions about worship. One writer acknowledges,

"...today's prevalent worship styles (often called a 'blended worship') owes its origin to the charismatic renewal, most are not charismatic worship as it was known in the 70's and 80's. That isn't necessarily bad or good, it is just different.."<sup>4</sup>

Those who have not changed their convictions are sometimes branded "traditionalists," and even "Pharisees." Yet if this were fifty years ago, those using such epithets would be as we are, for a godly consensus over these things prevailed then. In other words, we have not changed with spirit of the age – they have. Yet we are the ones who are deemed the troublers of Israel.

## **2. Worship is supremely important**

Worship is dearer to God than anything else we do. Robert Leighton once wrote, "No greater gift can be given to Christ than His people's love," and we could transpose that to say, "No greater tribute can be given to God than His people's worship." A little survey of scripture shows this.

*Firstly*, creation. The Bible opens, "In the beginning, God." Over six days God creates, and on the seventh day, He rests and consecrates the Sabbath Day. After just six days of earth's history comes a weekly day for the worship of the Creator. Adam, Eve, Abel, and the patriarchs would have worshipped God on the Sabbath Day. Worship is there from the beginning.

*Secondly*, the Ten Commandments. At the outset: "no other Gods before me," and then "Thou shalt make unto thyself no graven image, neither shalt thou bow thyself down" (Exodus 20:3-5). Next comes God's name and His day (Exodus 20:7-11) and the first table of the Moral Law is all about worship.

*Thirdly*, the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father which art in heaven, *hallowed* be thy name." As soon as we invoke the name of God our Father, we are to worship Him. "Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name. Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness" (Psalm 29:2).

*Fourthly*, Malachi 3:3, and the work of the refiner. As Jesus puts us through fiery trials to come forth as gold, it is that we "may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness." All His dealings with us are that He might have from us a holier, purer worship – the most important thing.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Goldsby, *A Background Study of the Charismatic Renewal*, <http://www.goldsbyfamily.info/theology/theology.htm>

*Fifthly*, in both Testaments, whenever God comes to man, the reaction is always a crumbling before Him. The more God manifests Himself, the lower men go before Him in awe, fear, and worship. Whether it is Abraham (Genesis 17:17), Job (42:5,6), Joshua (5:14,15), Isaiah (6:5), the disciples (Matthew 17:5,6), Peter (Luke 5:8), or John (Rev.1), as soon as they meet God the reflex action is the deepest reverence. He draws near to us like this now in the means of grace (see Psalm 22:3) and the effect should be the same.

The supreme importance to God and to us of worship is not the conviction of churches today. It is seen as a "secondary issue;" it can be modified to help "outsiders" feel more comfortable, and believers to find a style that suits them. Here is an example from the web site of Duke Street Church, Richmond,

"We use a variety of different styles of worship and types of music. You can expect a little bit of everything in the way of worship at Duke Street. We expect our church family to be mature enough to accept all kinds of music and worship styles, rather than defining 'the proper' way to worship by their own generational or personal preferences."<sup>5</sup>

The minister of this church, Dr. Liam Goligher, was a prominent speaker at the Evangelical Movement of Wales Aberystwyth Conference in August this year. His main address was, "What would the Doctor (Lloyd-Jones) think of Evangelicalism today?!" Does this not illustrate the slide into confusion that is Evangelicalism today?

With this issue of our magazine comes a critique of the new *Christian Hymns*. The original edition of this hymnbook in 1977 signalled a strengthening of the churches' worship back then, and the Lord's people rejoiced. Now, thirty years later, and the church scene so different, comes a second edition of this book. And its altered contents reflect the charismatically-driven changes we have outlined above. This is lamentable, but shows how far the pressure for change has affected even the Evangelical Movement of Wales. Churches that use this book will also find themselves unable to escape this pressure.

### **3. Worship is under the discipline of scripture**

Such is its importance, that God has put worship firmly under the control of His word. He knows that left to our devices we would get it wrong. Therefore, He has given us an authoritative to pattern revealed in scripture (Matthew 28:20).

Worship was minutely regulated in Old Testament days. The detailed prescriptions of the ceremonial law were there to be obeyed. The tabernacle, and afterwards the temple, the sacrificial altar, the furniture within those sacred places, the sacrifices and offerings, the priests, the choirs and musical instruments - in all these God was most particular. Violating some of these could be fatal (e.g. Leviticus 10:1-3; Numbers 4:15 with 1 Chronicles 13:7-10; 15:12-15).

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.dukestreetchurch.com/mod.php?mod=userpage&page\\_id=13&menu=1408](http://www.dukestreetchurch.com/mod.php?mod=userpage&page_id=13&menu=1408)

This applied even when people made their “lay altars” for worship. God in Exodus 20:25 stipulated what He required: “if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.” This is clear enough. No human hand must change anything. The stones must be left rough for God. However, in Isaiah 65:3 He complains of a people “that provoketh me to anger continually to my face; that sacrificeth in gardens, and burneth incense upon altars of brick.” One issue here were the altars of *brick*.

We can imagine the people saying, “But rough, misshapen lumps of stone are so unrefined. Let’s chisel neatly-shaped bricks for God and build our altars of those. We can use our masonry gifts in worship and erect aesthetically-pleasing altars on which to offer His sacrifices.” Yet God says that these innovators are people that “provoketh me to anger continually to my face.” We need to have this clearly in our minds: if we presume to do in worship otherwise than what God has said, we make “altars of brick.” One step away from word-regulated worship offends God and provokes the eyes of His glory. God has not changed under the gospel: He is as particular about His worship now as before, because He does not change.

Some might argue that, since Old Testament worship was so minutely regulated, why cannot we follow elements of *that*? Charismatics and their reformed sympathisers often appeal to the worship leaders, musical instruments, choirs, hand-clapping, dancing, etc. to justify their new worship. But this is inadmissible for two reasons,

*Firstly*, the ceremonial laws relating to worship were *typical*. They set forth Christ, gospel blessings, and spiritual worship (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19 “making melody in your heart to the Lord;” Hebrews 13:15; 1 Peter 2:5,9). With His coming, our Lord has fulfilled them all. Being typical, and now fulfilled, they cannot be the patterns for our worship. These things were Jewish and “the weak and beggarly elements” (Galatians 4:9). If people demand these, they should also have the tabernacle/temple, animal sacrifices, human priests, etc. But God rent the veil of the temple from the top downwards, and destroyed the temple itself in AD 70. The typical worship is over, fulfilling our Lord’s words to the Samaritan woman. Gospel worship leaves these things behind.

*Secondly*, Christian worship is patterned, not upon the temple/tabernacle and its typical paraphernalia, but upon the synagogue which eventually replaced the temple (cf Psalm 74:8). The principles of synagogue worship were there already, in Nehemiah 8:1-12, for example, anticipating its gospel counterpart.<sup>6</sup> Ezra stood in a pulpit of wood above all the people, the law was read distinctly, and the people mourned and rejoiced. We have there prayer and praise, the reading of the Word, the teaching of the Word, and its effects upon the assembly.

In Luke 4, the Lord Jesus enters the synagogue at Nazareth, is handed the scroll of Isaiah, from which He reads and teaches. That is another glimpse of synagogue worship. The main elements were singing the Psalms, prayer, the reading and teaching of the Word. This is the pattern for New Testament worship. James 2:2 is an interesting confirmation of this. It begins, “For if there come unto your

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<sup>6</sup>See further on this aspect in my *Is Contemporary Worship Music Defensible?* on the Bible League web site: [http://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/articles/Is\\_Contemporary\\_Music\\_Defensible.pdf](http://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/articles/Is_Contemporary_Music_Defensible.pdf)

assembly a man with a gold ring..." The marginal rendering of "assembly" is *sunagogē* – the Greek word for synagogue. The Christian church is patterned on the Jewish synagogue and is called such in this place.

This helps us to understand why the New Testament is virtually silent about the "mechanics" of worship. It is because its principles, in synagogue worship, are already there in the Old Testament and therefore do not need repetition. Under the gospel there is much greater emphasis on the inwardness and simplicity of worship, as anticipated by our Lord (John 4:24) and before Him, Isaiah (Isaiah 66:2).

#### **4. Worship must have God's Word as central**

This is confirmed by Psalm 138:2, "thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name." It is a remarkable expression. We would expect God's *name* to be the most magnified, but God says that His word is above His name. Is not this because His word *reveals* God's name, teaches us its meaning, gives content to it and inspires reverence for it? God's name without His word would be no expressed name to us. Therefore, the word in worship enables us to "sing his praises with understanding" (Psalm 47:7) and must be foremost. This has been the historic conviction of gospel churches until the last few decades.

The capitulation of churches to charismatic assumptions is part of the modern reaction against this. A while ago, there was a program in the Radio 4 *Beyond Belief* series on the subject of worship. The panellists discussed the way Muslims, Hindus and Charismatic Christians worship, and there were representatives of these taking part. The point made was that there is a *physicality* about their worship. Muslims bow down and touch the ground with their head in prayer, Hindus do similarly, and charismatics have their physical expressions too. One man then contrasted Protestant Reformed worship in this way: "People sitting in a building in rows of pews, meekly listening to a cerebral message. That is thin gruel."

We are not surprised to hear this caricature from someone who is probably a stranger to true worship. The world reckons worship should be expressed in sensual ways because this is all it knows. What is alarming about charismatic-type "liberated" worship is the same approach: carnal, fleshly, and knowing little restraint under the word of God.

Worship in spirit and *in truth*, however, will not only be governed by the word but come to its climax in that word preached. Then God speaks to us, and we in devout hearing make our worshipful response: "Now therefore are we all here present before God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God" (Acts 10:33). The Puritan, Arthur Hildersham, expressed it well: "He that hath the spirit of Christ, (and) any true love of zeal of God in his heart, will joy in the plentiful and free preaching of the Word, which is a chief part of God's worship, a principal occasion of our most solemn assemblies."

True worshippers seek to come before God in spirit and in truth, with a contrite spirit, trembling at His Word. Worship will then be intensely spiritual, with everything else reduced to its utmost simplicity. The more worship is like this, the

more we can expect the Lord to be among us and favour us with His manifested presence and commanded blessing.

### **5. New worship has lost confidence in God's word**

We need to ask, Why the need to reevaluate the content and style of worship in our day? Why borrow the worship music, songs, and methods of the Charismatics and break with the reverent worship our forefathers offered to God? The answer is because churches have lost confidence in the sufficiency of Holy Scripture to both regulate worship and be the instrument of gracious fruit. The same goes for the new methods of evangelism as the church tries to appeal to a secular world. The call to modernise is familiar. We have heard it from the FIEC, the compilers of the *Praise!* hymnbook, the Evangelical Movement of Wales. It is being sounded in so many quarters that we grow weary of it.

What is not mentioned, however, is where this might eventually lead us? For an answer, consider this advertisement for an event in Truro Cathedral, in Cornwall,

*It's Elvis, Gospel Truth!*

Elvis is coming to Truro Cathedral!

Johnny Cowling, Elvis impersonator, will break new ground when he performs the Gospel Music of Elvis Presley at Truro Cathedral on Sunday 6th August at 6.30pm.

The Elvis service forms part of the Cathedral's exploration of alternative styles of worship. It is part of a programme that has seen both Jazz and Country & Western style worship take place in Truro Cathedral for the first time.

Canon Perran Gay, the Cathedral's Head of Worship, explains, "We want this to be partly like an Elvis 'gig' and partly like an act of worship. I am genuinely excited by the challenge of 'engaging with' people who wouldn't normally come to the Cathedral. We believe that God gives us many ways in which to worship him, this is just one of many alternatives."

This advertisement, teeming with unscriptural innuendoes, is an extreme example, of course. Yet some of this language is familiar: "alternative styles of worship" ... "...Head of Worship" ... "'engaging with' people who wouldn't normally come." The high-apostate Church of England can almost be forgiven for a ludicrous resort as this. Yet brethren who know better seem blind to the fact that disobedience to God's word can lead us into a similar abyss. With our music bands, worship leaders, worship styles, songs and ditties we are already "a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not steadfast with God" (Psalm 78:8). Where will we be by the next generation?

Let us reject these things with all our hearts and worship God in spirit and in truth. Let us have confidence in God's word, be content to do God's work in God's way, and expect God's blessing through faithfulness to Him. If this is old fashioned, then the Bible is old-fashioned and real religion is old fashioned too.

Worship is the highest activity we engage in: nearest the angels and the glorified saints in heaven. It is more for God than for man. True worship is an inward adoration of the Most High and primarily vertical in its direction. As such, it has no attraction for the unbelieving world, nor, it seems, for Christians who make "music" and "a buzz" their prerequisites. It will, however, be esteemed by people who know something of an exercised heart, and a desire to worship God in the Spirit and according to His word.

Footnote

For a fuller treatment of this subject, see a special edition of *The Reformed Witness* (No.62, August 2006) and the article by Malcolm H. Watts entitled "Principles of Reformed Worship." Available from Mr. John Hooper, 8 Prospect Walk, Saltash, Cornwall PL12 4RG. johnhooper59@aol.com