

Authentic Worship

John 4:19-24

Preached March 14, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Introduction. If you have ever spent any time on the streets in Manhattan, you have probably been offered a deal that was difficult to refuse. A person walks up to you and offers to sell you a Rolex watch for \$10.95 – ten dollars and 95 cents that is. Then he opens his case and you get a glimpse of some watches that resemble a Rolex. Of course any sensible person knows that these watches cannot be the real thing and are knock-offs. They are not authentic.

We live in world where at times it is difficult to tell the genuine article from the imitation. Common on the scene today is virtual reality. One of the most lucrative movies in recent years, *Avatar*, has most of its characters generated by digital technology. When one sees them on the screen, they seem real. We have come so far since Gumby. At times, we can hardly tell the difference between what is authentic and what is an imitation and we sometimes seem to prefer the virtual to the real.

When it comes to the subject of worship, it is fair to ask, "what is authentic worship?" At times, is our worship like the virtual world of animation or a cheap knock-off of the real thing?

Nearly 2,000 years ago, a couple of people standing near a well were in conversation when the subject of authentic worship was raised. Let's take a few minutes to listen to their conversation and see what we can learn that can transform our worship.

The setting.

After having spent some time in the Judean area of Palestine, Jesus and his disciples decided to return to their home base in Galilee. They decided to take the most direct route to their destination that took them through Samaria. Most Jews avoided travel through this area because of the long-term animosity and prejudice that existed between the Samaritans and Jews. This animosity traced its history back to the reign of King Solomon's son Rehoboam (926-910 BC) and later intensified with the invasion by Assyria (721 BC) when the area was resettled and the remaining Jews intermixed with those settling the land.

Along their journey, Jesus stopped to rest in the shade of a well while his disciples went into the town to purchase food. While he was there, a woman came to draw water from the well. Jesus asked the woman to draw water for him to drink. His interaction with the woman opened up a conversation that led to the topic of worship.

During the conversation, the woman discerned that Jesus was a religious Jew and a prophet, so she asked him a question that had long been a point of contention between the Samaritans and Jews. "We Samaritans worship on this mountain (Mount Gerizim). You Jews worship in Jerusalem (Mount Zion). Where is the correct place to worship?"

Not where, but who. The woman's concern focused on the "where" of worship. Where should people worship?

Both Mt. Zion and Mt. Gerizim had rich histories as places for worship for the descendants of Abraham. Around 2000 BC, Mt. Zion was the place where most of the descendants of Abraham claimed their forefather built an altar to sacrifice his son Isaac. On that mountain, God provided a ram to be sacrificed instead of the son. But it was more than 1,000 years later, when David ruled as king, that location had religious significance for the Jews. During his reign, David made Jerusalem the central place where the Jews were to worship. Under the reign of his son Solomon, the temple was built there. For nearly 1,000 years either a temple or its remnants stood on Mount Zion, where Jews regularly worshiped.

Mt. Gerizim was also an important sacred site in their history. When Abraham first entered the land, he built the first altar near Mt. Gerizim at Shechem. (Of course this preceded the sacrifice of Isaac by several years. Later, when Jews occupied the land following the Exodus, it became the first religious site for them. God commanded people to gather on Gerizim and shout the blessings of God that would come as they obeyed. (This was nearly 400 years (1400 BC) prior to David establishing Zion as the worship center.) A few decades after the Jerusalem temple was constructed, civil strife split the nation and the northern kingdom made Gerizim their religious center.

In this brief history, I think you can get a sense of competing notions of which place of worship was the "better" or "right" place for worship. Is it in Mt. Gerizim or Mt. Zion? The woman at the well wanted Jesus to answer this long-standing dispute. It seemed like a fair question for a holy man to answer.

Questions about the "better" and "right" matters of worship have long been a source of discussion and contention. Early in my ministry, I served Apison United Methodist Church. As many of you know, Apison is a community adjacent to Collegedale, a community largely composed of people associated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church. I found the people there to be sincere people of faith and enjoyed the relationship I had with them. But it was common to hear the question raised as to what day was the proper day for followers of Jesus to worship – Saturday or Sunday.

Perhaps more common to a wide swath of the church in recent times is discussion concerning which "style" of worship is "better" or "the right way" to worship. The debate has largely been framed around differences of opinion over "contemporary" versus "traditional" worship. In some circles, these discussions gave rise to what some have called the "worship wars." It is not uncommon to have individuals from one side claim that their style of worship is superior to the other style. Of course those of you who are schooled in worship styles know there are far more styles than contemporary and traditional. There are

liturgical and free styles of worship, Charismatic/Pentecostal worship, Taizé, Orthodox – to name a few. In each style is a multitude of nuances.

Father Focused. Jesus' response to the woman at the well took the discussion on worship to a whole new dimension. He told her that the time was coming and was now there – (it had dawned with his presence) – that the question of *where* will not be and is not the issue. It is a moot discussion.

Then Jesus said, "*Authentic worshipers will worship the Father.*" The focus of worship will be on the Father. Worship is to be theo-centric. Worship is about God.

A few years ago, Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, became a Christian bestseller and spurred spiritual renewal. At that time I was the pastor of Burks and we used the study in the church. It had a significant impact on the church. I confess there are some points of theology where I diverge from Rick's perspective, yet there was one thing he wrote that I think I will never forget. He wrote in the first chapter, "It's not about you." The purpose of our lives is not about ourselves but about God. When it comes to worship, it is not about you or me.

Unfortunately, many of us have attempted to make worship about us. We want it performed in ways which we believe make it genuine and right and which please us. We come to receive certain types of feelings, have particular questions answered, have our personal beliefs affirmed, get charged up to live another week, etc. At times we want to be entertained. We want the message to speak directly to us. We want the music to make us feel good and please our palate. We often make worship about "me."

Authentic worship is not about "me." It is about God.

A little over a decade ago in a church in Watford, England, the congregation hit a spiritual apathy. The pastor decided for a period to take away the band and sound system. Not long after the instruments were reintroduced, the music director wrote the song *The Heart of Worship*. Listen to these words: *When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come / Longing just to bring something that's of worth that will bless your heart... / I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You,*

Jesus.
(<http://www.crosswalk.com/1253122>).

What God seeks in worship. Jesus took the message of authentic worship another step. Jesus said that authentic worshipers worship the Father in spirit and truth and this type of worship is what God seeks. Authentic worshipers are more concerned about what God wants than what they want.

American consumerism runs deep in our veins and has a tremendous influence on our worship. We go to worship looking for and sometimes shopping for the things we want. We want a particular type of music, a particular style of worship, a particular type of preaching, a certain type of dress code, a particular level of technology, etc. While we seem to think these will make worship more meaningful and pleasant for us, we have missed the main point. These issues are secondary. In authentic worship, we come asking, "What does God want?" "What does God want from us/me this day?"

Jesus gives this broad answer about what God wants in our worship – God wants us to worship in spirit and truth. I do not pretend to know the full extent of what this means but I do have some ideas.

For some within the Christian community, worship "in the Spirit" is understood as a certain type of emotional expression in worship which often has to do with ecstatic expression – shouting, speaking in tongues, being slain in the Spirit, etc. I hardly believe that this is what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of worshipping in the Spirit.

Jesus tells us something about the nature of God that is directly tied to how we worship. "God is Spirit." God is not a material being as we are, so our worship must have a spiritual component. Our worship must go deeper than external rites and practices and penetrate and flow from deep within us. Worship is to flow from the core of our being. It is at the level of the human spirit that God's spirit connects with us and we connect with God's spirit. Talking about this is difficult because words tend to fail us at this level.

Paul gave us some clues about this spirit connection in Romans 8. He writes that *those who are led by the Spirit are the children of God* (14). Then he goes on to express a similar thought: *the Spirit (of God) bears witness with our Spirit that we*

are the children of God. Later he tells of the deep work of the Spirit: *We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express* (26). While these thoughts deserve a great deal of explanation, it is clear to see that God desires worship that goes below the surface and flows into and out of the depth of being.

Authentic worship in the spirit is balanced by worship in the truth. While one could argue that worship in truth has a relationship to a true understanding of God – knowledge of God ("we Jews worship what we know"), I believe something more is intended. Worship in truth means that as we worship we are genuine before God. We stop pretending and come as we are. (Like the newlyweds who wake up the morning after the honeymoon and the make-up is worn off, their hair is messed up and morning breath is a reality. – Now I am not saying any of us should come to church without dressing appropriately, brushing one's teeth or combing one's hair. Come to think of it... I think I forgot to comb mine.)

In Psalm 15, the psalmist asks who will dwell in God's sanctuary. He responds by saying those who walk blamelessly, do what is righteous and speak the truth from the heart. So authentic worship is about being honest with God. In Psalm 51, David recalls that God desires "truth in one's inward being." Then he calls out for God to "purge," "cleanse," and "wash" him. So worship in truth is about coming before God confessing who and what we are and acknowledging our great need for God.

Response. This morning I want us to share in an act of worship that is somewhat risky. I want us to spend a couple of minutes in silence without music or comment. During that time, I invite you to be honest with God about where you are in your relationship with Him. In silent prayer express those thoughts that come to your mind. Allow the Spirit of God to stir within you and listen for God's voice and be sensitive to God's touch. When you hear the music, you are invited to join in our hymn as you are led.