

## What Is True Worship?

Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 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 is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

The Gospel of John, Chapter 4

In recent years I have begun to think that Christians have failed to appreciate the force of our Lord's words to the women at the well in John Chapter 4. In fact, this particular failure has kept us from rightly understanding "worship" under the New Covenant. It may also be the real problem that lies at back of our recent "worship wars" — with everyone choosing sides over "traditional vs. contemporary" formats. Let me try and explain — and please bear with a bit of "armchair theologizing."

Under the Old Covenant, worship was highly formalized — reflecting the nature of that covenant's administration:

earthly, physical; concrete in nature, though pointing analogously ("by way of analogy") to something more spiritual and, hence, abstract.

This is why formal worship was to take place at set times and set places; under very specific guidelines:

at the "tent of meeting"; at the temple;  
on the appointed day, et cetera.

But our Lord indicated that a radical change was about to take place — a change in "worship" that was commensurate with the radical change taking place with the inauguration of the New Covenant **itself**. ("The Coming of the Kingdom.")

New Covenant worship is **not** something that takes place at certain times and at certain places. Rather, it is an all-encompassing reality that touches every moment, and all places. To put it simply:

Becoming a "Christian" — to be born from above by the Holy Spirit, who lives in us so that we ourselves are the "New Covenant sanctuary" — sets us apart for a life of unceasing worship of the true and living God.

For the Christian, **all of life** is worship:

praying, singing, reading, writing, speaking;  
baking bread, drinking wine;  
making love to our husband or wife.  
All of it.

Worship is not something we are called to do at a particular place on a Sunday morning. Nor is it the "part of the service" where we sing "worships songs." Preaching, singing, taking up the offering — the things

we normally think of as "worship activities" — are not any more "worshipful" than greeting visitors, distributing coffee, and helping elderly people to their cars.

A life of unceasing worship is what the Gospel **produces** — or should produce, that is. Note how Paul ties the two together in the book of Romans — following his 11 chapter delineation of what God has done in Christ:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12

The New Testament **never** commands Christians to gather for worship. They are expected to gather — to be sure, for they are members one of another ([Ephesians 4](#); [1 Corinthians 12](#)) — but what for?

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

1 Corinthians 14:26

New Testament gatherings are primarily — if not exclusively — for the "building up" of one another; to encourage one another in the faith. In fact, even that oft-quoted passage in Hebrews tells us that it is our "meeting together" — not our "worship together" — that we are not to neglect. And why?

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another . . .

[Hebrews 10:24-25](#)

Does that mean that there is no special dynamic when we gather together as believers in the Lord — to sing, to be taught the Word? Sure there is. In fact, our Lord indicated that His own presence would be manifest — presumably in some special sense — whenever 2 or 3 are gathered in His name ([Matthew 18](#)). But even there, it is the exercise of a fellowship's discipline that is being considered . . . not its "worship."

**As Christians, we need to avoid "Old Covenant" thinking regarding worship.** Harold Best, in his definitive book [Unceasing Worship](#), notes this well:

I believe that our overemphasis on time/place/music worship might partly come from a failure to account for the final dimensions of worship that a New Testament theology can bring to us. Thus talking about worship renewal the way we tend to do is almost like talking about Old Testament renewal instead of Old Testament fulfillment.

Too much talk about worship fails to adequately engage the reality of life under the New Covenant. I am afraid many — if not most — of our "Fathers" in the faith failed at precisely this point. They drew too many principles from the Old Covenant, imposing them upon life in the New Covenant age. [See Jeremiah Burroughs [Gospel Worship](#) for an example of this]. And much of the resistance to contemporary styles of "worship" today — especially among our confessional Reformed and Puritan-influenced family members — is more an effort to protect their traditions than to gather light from the Scriptures themselves. [The book [With Reverence and Awe](#) is a good example.]

But there is an equal failure today among many promoting so-called "contemporary worship." There is a "looseness" in the use of Old Testament language — seemingly forgetful of its fulfillment in the Gospel.

Far too many worship leaders, for example, play the role of High Priest, leading the people "into the presence of God" in a manner which the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us has been far surpassed in Christ. Instead of celebrating the glorious freedom and intimacy of the New Covenant, such "worship" often leaves us (figuratively) with Moses on this side of the river Jordan, struggling to cross over to the other side and into the Promised Land. It may be existentially satisfying, but it is hardly worship in spirit and truth. As author [David Peterson notes](#) so well, New Covenant worship grows out of the Gospel; it uses the language of fulfillment — not of promise. Those who fail to make that careful distinction may be leading people into a kind of worship that has no basis in the New Testament. They need to be more careful in their use of language.

**What does this mean from a practical standpoint?** It ought to put an end to our obsessive judging of "styles" and "forms" of "worship" — as if the New Testament prescribed these in the same manner as the Old Testament did. That is clearly **not** the case. What various Christians choose to do when gathering together — for their mutual edification — will be rich in its diverse application of Scriptural principles. Not all gatherings will look the same. There is a unity in principle, but diversity in the application of the principle across the barriers of culture, place and time.

Individual Christians, then — as unceasing worshippers, gathering with other unceasing worshippers — need to be flexible and charitable (as well as *scripturally* discerning) when encountering "unfamiliar" worship practices. In fact, an appreciation of the divergent experiences and practices of other Christian communities would go a long way towards building unity — something [our Lord said](#) would bring a good testimony before a watching world. I'm afraid the constant squabbling over these things has had the opposite effect . . .

and it is time we stopped.

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(website editorial comment)