

Worship - The Changes

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[0 : 0 0] I would like to return this evening to John chapter 4 and particularly the words that Jesus speaks to the women of Samaria when he is discussing the issue of worship with her.

God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth verse 24 of that chapter. I would like to use that as a theme for a short while this evening and the theme of the service is worship the change if you are visiting with us or if you are not a normally worshipper with us in the free church then maybe not apologize but I would like to put you in the picture that the church is changing or has changed its position slightly in terms of worship or form of worship and so I want to spend a little bit of time speaking about that not dealing with the issues as such but just speaking about the whole situation we find ourselves in the church has decided to allow a greater freedom in our sung praise not only singing from the Psalms but also singing from a wider constituency of biblical truth beyond Old Testament revelation and to if we choose accompany that with musical instruments.

The principles the practice will change in some places the practice will not change in other places the principles will remain the same as a church the principles of purity of worship that is that we believe in what Jesus speaks about here that the kind of worshippers that Jesus wants the kind of worshippers that God wants are those who worship in spirit and in truth and that remains the situation that we believe in and that we will follow as a church.

Now I recognize and know that for some people it's a very big issue more so than for others particularly maybe in our own church which is quite diverse in its background and in where people come from if people have been born and bred in the free church and have only ever been used to singing Psalms then the issue is maybe much bigger and much more difficult to entertain and to think about than it is for some others who may be coming from a tradition that is already singing hymns and using musical instruments or whatever it might be. But next month is a congregation in two at least two of our evening services next month we hope to introduce some songs that will reflect some glorious Christian truths wider than simply from the Psalms some hymns and as we have already been doing singing New Testament paraphrase as well and I recognize and I appreciate that that is for some a big change and a big change in thinking and a big change in practice. I'd like to look through from this passage one or two worship principles and encourage us to have a biblical perspective in all of this. I'm not going to rehearse the arguments for or for a broader singing of Christian truth at the moment that has been done plenty and there's plenty of opportunities to read very detailed and very well thought through arguments on both sides. But I would want to remind ourselves as a congregation of some broader principles and also to remember and to remind ourselves that what is happening in the church isn't the thin edge of some kind of theological liberalism that's sneaking in through the back door. That's not the case and we must remember that the free church is committed to its reformed and conservative evangelical understanding of the faith, its orthodox and its very core scripture alone is our guide and remains our guide and Psalms will remain and singing Psalms will remain part of that tradition to which we belong and that for some is something that needs to be stated and reminded of. It isn't an issue for division nor for disunity unless of course people see the church like a supermarket where there is a consumer mentality where we say we want to be part of a church where we feel comfortable where it's something that we are happy with.

And we recognize the foundations of biblical truth and orthodoxy that we remain in and there are no grounds for anyone to divide over this issue. But here we come to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan women and they're discussing worship and the Samaritan woman asks a question.

[6 : 08] In John chapter 4 Jesus has been interacting with her and has exposed her rather dubious past in terms of her relationships having been married and divorced several times. She's now living with a guy who she's not married to and having done so she rather curtly and quickly acknowledges him as a prophet and then moves on to a religious question.

I can see you're a prophet and in verse 20 she comes up with this discussion. Her father's worshiped on this mountain but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem. Why does she ask that question? Why does she ask that question about worship?

Well there may be a couple of reasons that she does and I'm just surmising from what we have in front of us in scripture. It could be that she was interested in this religious controversy about worship between the Jews and the Samaritans which was very deep-seated and very damaging to truth. There was deep, deep mistrust and hatreds on both sides and she may have been interested to find out who this prophet, who he sided with. It was very unusual for any Jewish person, particularly a man, particularly a religious leader or someone that she recognized as such, having anything to do with Samaritans let alone speak to one a woman particularly in this situation.

So she may have just been interested to find out his angle on this controversy that was raging between these two parties and there always is interest in religious controversy and that remains people love a good fight and people love a good controversy and people want to work up a controversy even when there isn't one and people love to see these things sometimes happen. Some people do. Who is right? Who's on God's side? Where is the power shifting to?

What is the right way forward in these controversies? And we've always recognized and seen and experienced some of us more than others controversy in the church but Jesus changes her direction.

[9 : 01] Jesus doesn't answer that very often we find that in scripture that Jesus doesn't answer questions directly but he changes the direction. So maybe it was because she was interested in controversy or it might have been that she simply grasped anything that came to her mind to change the subject because she was aware of the piercing gaze of Jesus ever pure and clean eyes into her heart exposing her needs and exposing that she was someone who needed the Messiah, someone who needed a Savior. She recognized and saw that and was made to feel uncomfortable because of it and so changed the subject into something that didn't really affect her personally and moved away from this rather dangerous confrontation between this prophet Jesus and her own morality and her own past and her own need. Remember that she was probably out here drawing water at very unusual time of the day in the middle of the day. That wasn't a normal time to draw water but she was probably ostracized from social company because of her life and lifestyle at that time and so she didn't draw water with all the other women who gathered together in the morning to discuss the various things of the day and gather the water but she was there on her own. Maybe she simply wanted to change the subject and again it's always much easier for us to discuss religion or to discuss religious matters or to discuss forms of worship than it is to allow Christ to deal with her hearts and to allow his light to shine there. Jesus would have none of it.

There's always that danger isn't there that we deflect the gaze of Christ from our hearts because we prefer to discuss church or religion or a philosophical attitude towards things or whatever it might be. Church battles that happen, church struggles and difficulties are rarely edifying. They may be but rarely seldom will they be on principle. Often they are based on pride. Division is seldom noble in the kingdom of God because unity is so crucial to the person and the being of the living God. I've always had a bit of a personal depression about sometimes the way we deal with things as a church. I saw it in 2000 when we split as a church and a little bit seeing it again over this issue among a few people. Nobody in this congregation I hasten to add, thankfully, but sometimes see a real passion among some for matters of procedure or form and outward expressions. Amazing passion and interest and desire that is not matched when we come to discuss evangelism or the lost or reaching out and planting churches or fulfilling the Great Commission. Great interest and energy and commitment to these more peripheral issues. But when it comes to our Great Commission, blank eyes and disinterest, great depression. But what is Jesus' answer to worship and to true worship? It is worship that is in spirit and in truth. That is the core of worship. It is relational. It's relational with

God. We worship in spirit and truth and because he says why? Because God is a spirit and those who and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. He brings it to that relational level.

It kind of at one level fits in with what we were saying this morning so much about worship and our understanding of worship. We can only worship a living and real God and a God who is worthy of worship and at some levels it's related to that. We see him and worship him through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and God, Jesus Christ is determined here to deal with this woman's heart to expose her heart and her needs of a Savior in order that she can be a true worshiper and that is what goes on in the discussion and in much of what we don't know about this story but that she comes round to that place of faith. Worship then is what transforms our heart and informs our lives. True worship transforms our heart. Worship must be in spirit and in truth.

That is, it needs to be spiritual. You know we can do all the outward things. Anyone can do all the outward things. Any person can worship outwardly in a way that is the same as everybody else but genuine worship must be more than that. It is that but it is more than that. It is spiritual.

[15 : 21] It comes from within us and it comes from a rebirth within us which Jesus speaks about in the previous chapter, the chapter headings, the chapter divisions not being there as we saw this morning in the original when he's dealing with Nicodemus and Nicodemus is reminded that in order to worship God that he must be born anew, born afresh, born of the Spirit and Jesus in this passage is speaking about the living water to the Samaritan woman reminding her that there is a spiritual refreshment that comes from God that we need in our worship so that genuine worship must first and always be transformational from the inside out, humble repentance and faith and that remains for us a lifelong struggle and it's one of the reasons we gather together to worship to remind ourselves of that truth that we come together and that we need one another and we need Christ to constantly be transforming our hearts. Proverbs 4, 23, guard your heart because it's the wellspring of your life and spiritually that's what we all do and must do.

That's our personal responsibility. I guard my heart, you guard yours, you stand before God, you live before God. God is your Savior and God knows your heart and mine and first and foremost our worship must be Spirit led from hearts that have come and are continually dependent on Him and that worship must also be in truth. It's both spiritual and it's in truth, that's an important balance. The truth of God's revealed word, the truth of Christ Himself who is called the word in John chapter 1 is to be the parameters that guide everything about our lives and worship because remember worship isn't just the hour that we're here in church. Worship is more than that, it is also all of our life. It's our corporate worship but that can sometimes be in a sense the easy bit but just Romans 12 reminds us we're to give our bodies as living sacrifices, whole and acceptable to God which is our acceptable worship. We give Him our lives so that all our lives are to be transformational from the inside out and also informed by truth, the truth of God's word.

Scripture dictates our priorities. Scripture speaks of Christ. Christ is the beginning, the middle and the end of Scripture. Christ is the core of Scripture.

Scripture, Christ revealed in Scripture the preeminence of redemption and his redemptive work through Scripture, the centrality of grace, of generosity and of His love.

His calling on our lives to be disciples, to make disciples and to keep disciples is what we are empowered and called to do by His great commission for the glory of God.

[19 : 02] That's what we're about as a church. That's what about as a people together. That's what our constitution upholds. That's what our vows recognize. They encapsulate that great preeminence of Scripture which we hold dear. And that is why the church can never claim its own infallibility apart from Scripture, not in its constitution, not in its vows.

Scripture alone is what guides our lives and our worship and our church.

And we acknowledge and we recognize today, while I do at least, that both sides on this particular argument, if you want to call it an argument, is discussion, this interpretation, base their arguments on Scripture, which suggests to me that Scripture allows both positions to be held.

Which suggests to me that it's not a matter of the basis, the foundation of our faith.

Which suggests to me that we must respect one another and move forward together in unity. So what is briefly the way forward for us as we progress as a church, as a congregation?

[20 : 45] Well, probably we need to remind ourselves that we don't really like change. I think that's fair to say. That's fair to say by the fact that most of us will come to church and sit in the same seats every week.

We like to do things the same. Generally, not all of you. Some of you are very good at sitting in different seats. But most of us like things to be the same, one way or another, in our lives and much more so probably in the church. It's what I'm used to. It's what I've always done.

It's always been the way in this church. Why do we need to change? We don't like that. And that's just to be human. That's absolutely normal and to be expected.

And yet as Christians, the very core of our lives is a willingness to change daily.

It's a willingness not to be in a rut, not always to think the same way but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and our hearts and allowing Scripture to inform us.

[22 : 02] Recognizing that change sometimes when we don't like it is what God will use to sanctify us maybe together as a people in terms of not the issue but how we deal with that issue as Christians together. And it's always vital. I think it's one thing that maybe there's been very little talk about in this church is a theology of change, how we deal with change, what are the parameters of change, how we interact with one another through change, through things we don't like, through things that we're not used to, things that may be difficult.

That's a good thing to learn in a family, isn't it? How to deal with trouble, difficulty, problems, problems, differences of opinion, different interpretations of things. We don't just leave the family, we don't just go, I don't want to find another family now, I've had enough of this one.

We work through it because we love our family because it's blood courses through our veins. That's why we're not consumerist, we don't just go elsewhere. But what is God teaching?

What does God want me to do through this? How can I be part of the answer rather than simply exposing or talking about the problem? We don't like change.

We also, I hope, and I'm sure this is true, don't like trouble. That's good. I'm glad. And as we pray about this, then there shouldn't be any. We move forward and move forward together.

[23 : 54] But also, it's important to stress that the Psalms aren't second class. This is not about ditching something for something else. This has never been in my understanding and in the decision of the church, an exercise of becoming trendy or of winning people from outside or of keeping our young people. Whatever might be a byproduct of what happens, this has been a decision based on biblical principle, whether people choose to agree with that principle or not.

We have a great opportunity as a church to both safeguard and encourage and encourage Psalm singing in simple spiritual worship while embracing the richness of New Testament revelation in songs. We know the Psalms are unparalleled in their prophetic unfolding of Jesus. We know that, and that is vital. We know they're unsurpassed in their personal exposure of our hearts in song, of doubt, of fear, of darkness, of difficulty and of praise.

We know that. And it's a shame that the wider Christian church that choose not to sing Psalms have lost out on that incredible richness. But we also recognize that our praise can be augmented.

Our song praise with the fullness of New Testament revelation, singing about the cross and the resurrection and the ascension, singing about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit revealed beautifully in the New Testament, singing about the Holy Spirit as our gift, about Pentecost, about the church and about heaven. And to do so, we believe will enrich our understanding and our worship and with accompaniment, not just of our voice, which is a glorious instrument, but occasionally with some simple accompaniment to simply supplement that voice, not as a performance, but as an accompaniment to enable us to praise better. May God enable us to keep our perspective and guard our own hearts and remind ourselves of the truth on which we found our church and our faith and not stir up or be engaged in undue controversy. Life's really short. I've heard of two guys this week, one not a Christian, as far as I know, sorry, I shouldn't say he's not a Christian, as far as I know, but one very definitely a Christian who's both 30 years old, both who died this week.

And it just reminds me how short life is, how few the opportunities are that we have and how precious is this time that we are alive. May we keep our hearts and our minds focused on Jesus and Jesus Christ, will we do that? And may you support us. And when we have difficulties, whether it's on this issue or any other issue, may we all work together to be part of the answer and their in grow and be sanctified and develop rather than be part of the problem.

[28 : 22] Let's put our heads in prayer. Father God, we ask and pray that you would remind us of your great commission to be a Bible believing church that reaches out with Jesus Christ and his good news to independence on you, make disciples and keep disciples. And may we do all that we do for your glory. We recognize and know that the issues we've been dealing with tonight are very close to many people's hearts and much difficulty and pain and hurt has been and will be no doubt caused over this issue. And we do remember again the wider church and the difficulties that are faced in some areas.

We pray, Lord God, for a pouring out of your spirit that we might act nobly and humbly and respectfully and graciously towards one another and remind ourselves of our greater calling and of our greater responsibilities and of our greater accountability to the living God for fulfilling these with grace and tenderness and forgiveness and conviction and understanding and a recognition of your sovereign glory. Help us, we pray, Lord, to be a mature and grown-up church as we deal with this issue and to keep our eyes single-mindedly on the Lord Jesus Christ and in so doing therefore may it be for us a great exercise. Guide us, we pray and keep us and enable us to always live our lives and engage in our corporate worship in spirit and in truth because these are the worshipers that you are looking for and that you are seeking. And so we ask for your help in this and ask for an outpouring of your spirit upon us. We thank you for church today.

We thank you for everyone who's been in church, for lots of new people who have been coming to church over these last few weeks for whom the Spirit of God is working in and drawing them to worship. We rejoice in these things and recognize that when that's the case, often there is spiritual attack and there is spiritual opposition which we also sense and feel and pray that you would guide us through that and that they would not be in us at any level a bitter spirit that might cause us to drift from one another. Be with those who are struggling in their faith with deep, deep issues and we ask and pray for a sense in their lives of your presence, of your nearness, of your comfort, of your peace, of your spirit and may they be given patience and grace to persevere.

Go before us then, we pray and bless us in Jesus' name. Amen.