

Exploring Our Vision Statement: Worship

A) Introduction

During this time of transition, it is important to explore who we HAVE BEEN and who we ARE as a church in order to discover who we are BECOMING. Pastor Andy began that process with us by surveying you and your families and finding out your experiences with Oak Grove, what you've appreciated, what you find important, and what might be some areas that you would like to see changed. Over the next 4 weeks, we will be exploring our vision statement, a series of propositions that describe who we aim to be as a church as we work at God's mission for us in this community. Specifically, we are going to be looking at the areas of worship, evangelism, hospitality, and service. The hope, then, is that we can take a good look at these things, consider if they are still priorities for our church and why, and then if they are recommit to them as we move forward together. *And by the way, if you don't know what our vision statement is, it's on the back of the bulletin.*

The area that we will be looking at today is worship. According to our vision statement, we are "Aiming to worship God in Spirit and in truth." This is taken directly from our Scripture passage today. And in fact, this is a statement we revised a few years ago from what it said before: "Aiming to provide meaningful worship services." We thought that while the aim was a good one, 'meaningful worship' is a pretty vague concept and is also pretty subjective to the person. What is meaningful to you may not be meaningful to me, and vice-versa. Additionally, 'meaningful worship' says that But 'aiming to worship in spirit and truth' as a goal says that our priority is to design worship that is meaningful to US. The truth is, worship is not about what the service does for US; it is about what we can offer to God.

So what does it mean to worship in 'spirit and truth?' A.W. Tozer writes in his book "Whatever Happened to Worship?": *"We must humbly worship God in spirit and in truth. Each one of us stands before the truth to be judged. Is it not now plain that the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit of God, far from being an optional luxury in our Christian lives, is a necessity."*

So, if the presence of the Holy Spirit is necessary for Spirit-filled and truthful worship, are we inviting the Holy Spirit to be present in our worship services, and are we prepared to experience and receive the Holy Spirit in ourselves?

But what is Spirit-filled worship? For too many years, the church has had the idea that the church was only spirit-filled if it had emotionalism and ecstatic experiences, and anything less than means the Spirit of God is not at work. I have book in my collection that was a compilation of talks on worship given at Goshen College in the mid-60's on the topic of worship. And in one of the talks Alvin Beachy defined the purpose of worship as the building up of community, and not for the person to have some kind of mystical and joyful spiritual experience:

“The purpose of worship in both Old and New Testaments is to build up or edify the community, not to create ecstatic experiences or a warm glow for the individual. The worship experience is not to be one which turns in upon itself, finding its own end in some private experience of ecstasy. It must be a means of grace, a communication of God’s act of salvation, in order that the worshiper may be free to give himself in love for the upbuilding of the community of faith.”

Historically Mennonite Churches focused on worship as something of and for the community, to the exclusion of the work of the Spirit. To avoid being like the Pentecostals or Charismatics of the day, it would appear that they worshiped in truth but not necessarily in spirit. *But part of the problem was equating spirit-filled worship with ecstatic responses* like falling out, speaking in tongues, and dancing in the aisles, which is an incredibly narrow view of the Spirit. Alternately to deny that those outpourings can be a possibility in spirit-filled worship is narrow.

Transition: So, let’s consider today what Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4 tells us about true worship, in Spirit and truth.

B) The Story

To understand the real meaning behind Jesus’ words here, we need to understand the background between the Jewish people and the Samaritans. Because it’s to this context that he speaks words of ‘spirit’ and ‘truth.’

In 722, Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Samaria and carried away all of its Jewish inhabitants. Now, one of the strictest Jewish laws was that Jews were not to marry anyone from another nation. God knew that the Jews were not strong enough to keep the purity of the religion if foreign influences were introduced, so they were forbidden to intermarry. But, when the Jews of Samaria were taken into captivity, they decided to marry foreign peoples and “lost” their essential Jewishness. All of the sudden, they weren’t worshipping Yahweh alone. He was just one of a host of other gods. So, when they came back from exile and the Jews of Judah came out of exile from Babylon, there was a real problem. The Jews from the southern Kingdom had for the most part maintained their faith and did not intermarry, and they were very bitter that the Samaritans had broken these laws. So when the Samaritans offered to help the Judeans to rebuild the wall and the temple, they were rejected. So the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerazim and worshipped there. And that was the beginning of a long-standing and deeply rooted feud that continued into Jesus’ ministry and existed when He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well.

So now, two people groups who come from the line of David, Moses, and Abraham, are now claiming to be the people of God, but differ significantly on where proper worship happens: Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim. This division highlights the importance we put on PLACE when

considering worship, or rather, the misunderstanding that PLACE has anything to do with “right” or “wrong” worship.

And so we come to this scene where Jesus, a Jew, engages this woman, a Samaritan. Already ripe with drama and tension, Jesus calls to her attention that she has been married 5 times now, and the man she currently is with is not her husband. The woman was amazed, and probably a little embarrassed, that this man she had just met knew so much about her intimate life. She declares that he must be a prophet, but is confused because he was a Jew, and they worshiped differently than her. So how could someone who is so different have that kind of power.

This is where things get really interesting because to everyone’s surprise Jesus is about to challenge BOTH the Samaritan AND the Jewish understanding of proper worship.

He says in v. 21: ²¹ **“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.**

Firstly, a time is coming where neither Holy place would be the designated location for worship. He continues:

²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

Jesus does criticize the Samaritans. Because the Samaritans had married non-Jewish persons and mixed their faiths, they worshiped what they didn’t know, and because the Jewish people had kept their faith untainted, although they had a pretty long history of unfaithfulness to God, salvation was coming through the Jews, through Jesus.

However, Jesus then states that true worship would happen in Spirit and Truth.

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 seeks such as these to worship him.** ²⁴ **God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”**

What does it mean for both the Jews and Gentiles to worship in Spirit and Truth? Both thought that they had cornered what acceptable religion was, but the truth was that neither had it all right. Reformation theologian Wolfgang Musculus draws a comparison between ‘spirit’ and ‘truth’ and states that both Jews and Samaritans were missing one of those elements in their worship. The Jewish people were worshipping according to tradition and missed the Spirit of worship. The Samaritans may have been worshipping in Spirit, but they did not have the truth of the real God.

Transition: So let's look at each element and consider what it means for us to worship in that way.

C) Worship in Spirit

Jesus' direction to Worship in Spirit was a direct call-out to the way the Jewish people had been worshipping. They were experts at following their laws and religious rituals and doing the right forms of worship, but their hearts weren't in it.

Matthew 15:6 -9

⁶ So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"

The Jewish people had gotten things mixed up, thinking that proper worship was about doing the right things and forgetting that what God really wanted from them was to let Him into their hearts. Worshipping in Spirit, then, is worship where the heart and the actions are in alignment because the person has surrendered themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Again, in "Whatever Happened to Worship," A.W. Tozer writes: "It is impossible for any of us to worship God without the impartation of the Holy Spirit. It is the operation of the Spirit of God within us that enables us to worship God acceptably through that Person we call Jesus Christ, who is Himself God. "

Transition: So now that we understand that Worship in Spirit means allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us so that our hearts match and drive our worship. What then does it mean to worship in Truth?

D) Worship in Truth

While Jesus directed "Spirit" to the Jewish people, he was directing "truth" to the Samaritans. Their worship may have been sincere, but they were worshipping a God that was some mixture of who they had learned about from Moses and who they had learned about from their pagan spouses and neighbors.

Tozer writes "It is entirely possible for humans to have recognized forms of worship apart from Christ and apart from the salvation He offers."

It is possible to worship 'what we don't know' and have a real experience with it; people have meaningful 'worship' experiences all the time where they are overwhelmed by the emotion of

the situation, but just because they are authentic experiences doesn't mean that they are acceptable to God. If we worship a God we don't know or a God of our own creation, then no matter how real it might feel, it isn't worship God desires. This is why it is important for Christians to know God through reading Scripture, praying, going to Sunday School, participating in small groups, and testing what they think they understand about God with their fellow Christians. This is also why we gather together every Sunday to worship together as a family, and we can agree with Alvin Beachy's assessment that worship can be "*for the upbuilding of the community of faith.*"

Transition: So, to worship in Spirit is to align our hearts and actions in the Spirit of God, and to worship in Truth is to really know and understand the God that we praise. And what we find out at the end of this section of John is that 'spirit' and 'truth' both come together in person of Jesus Christ.

E) Worship In Jesus

²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶Jesus said to her, "**I am he, the one who is speaking to you.**"

Jesus' statement "I am He" bridges the gap between the spiritless worship of the Jewish people and the truthless worship of the Samaritans. Both groups thought that they were right in what they were doing, and both groups were eager to exclude the other because they did not worship 'correctly.' Jesus was saying that in Him they could find both Spirit and Truth. This is why we as Mennonites proclaim as one of our core beliefs that "Jesus is the Center of our Faith.

Conclusion:

Aiming to worship in Spirit and Truth: is this still a priority for Oak Grove Mennonite Church? I would say that it definitely is; we do it well, and it is probably the thing that we spend the most time, energy, and resources on throughout the year, alongside of Christian education. So we move forward as a Church together, can we recommit to working at Worshipping in Spirit and Truth? Worship expert Constance Cherry says that "Effective worship is never a result of our efforts. Worship happens when we learn to say yes in ever-increasing ways to God's invitation to encounter him." Have we encountered God this morning in worship? Did we come to expecting God's invitation to worship? Are we open to the movement of the Spirit in ourselves, in this place, and in our family of believers?