

Navigating a Worship War

John 4:20-24

Introduction

1. An email that went around a few years ago told about two Christians who visited church services away from their homes. One was a farmer who attended a large city church, the other a city boy visiting relatives in the country. Both thought the services they visited were good, but different.
2. The farmer noted that the city church sang praise choruses instead of hymns. He explained:

Well, it's like this. If I were to say to you, "Martha, Martha, the cows are in the corn," that would be a hymn. But if I were to say you, "Martha, Martha, Martha, Oh, Martha, MARTHA, MARTHA, the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the white cows, the black and white cows, the COWS, COWS, COWS, are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the CORN, CORN, CORN. . . ." Then, if I were to repeat the whole thing two or three times, well that would be a praise chorus.
3. The city boy said the country church sang hymns instead of praise choruses. He explained:

Well, it's like this. If I were to say to you, "Martha, Martha, the cows are in the corn," that would be a regular song. But if I were to say to you, "Oh Martha, dear Martha, hear thou my cry. Incline thine ear to hear the words of my mouth. Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear by and by to the righteous, inimitable, glorious truth. . . ." Then, if I were to sing only verses one, three and four and do a key change on the last verse, well that would be a hymn.¹
4. Bruce McLarty introduced an article on church music with that story, showing that however much we might enjoy it (and some may not!), what it represents is serious.
 - a. "This little story accurately describes the constantly changing face of church music. Congregations all over the world are struggling with, fighting about, and even splitting over musical preferences. American individualism and a consumer mentality are all too often combining to rip apart Christian fellowship."
 - b. "Even the way worship songs are labeled today indicates how strong the differences are among Christians when it comes to describing our favorite music. Older songs are sometimes described as 'the good hymns,' or even 'the great hymns,' leaving one to wonder if some regard more recent songs as 'the bad hymns' or even 'the awful hymns.' It is also common today to speak of newer songs as 'praise songs,' leaving others to ask if praise was not discovered until the last 20 years!" (McLarty, 17).
5. Some observations are in order.

¹ In Bruce McLarty, "Waiting for Each Other: The Struggle Over Church Music," *Church & Family*, Fall/Winter 2004: 16.

- a. McLarty wrote within the context of American churches of Christ, but ours is not the only fellowship to experience what have been called “the worship wars.”
 - b. Since music is so important in our culture, and so much a part of our church experiences, it is not surprising that church music would be a flash point in the current debates. But the worship wars are not just about music.
 - c. None of the song styles being debated today match the song styles used by the earliest Christians; all of us have been influenced by culture.
 - d. For the record, I do not think congregations have to make either-or choices between “hymns” and “praise songs.” Many have functioned well and grown in their faith while utilizing both, often in the same service. Nor do I think all of one type are inherently good or bad. I’ve sung some “bad” of both; and I’ve sung some of both that were “good” (a comment about content, not style).
 - e. The disagreements we’ve recently experienced are not the first debates sincere believers have had over song styles—or, for that matter, about other components of worship assemblies.
6. There is an upside to the debate: Christians are talking about worship. That is good, since worship is a major theme in Scripture and vital to the welfare and mission of the church.
 7. But there’s a difference between talking about worship and talking about it scripturally and intelligently. In these studies, I aim to do the latter, beginning with a look at an ancient worship war.

Body

I. The War Jesus Mediated (John 4:20-24).

- A. Whether to shift the conversation away from her personal life, or because she thought that a “prophet” (v 19) could surely give insight that would resolve it, the woman at the well brought up the longstanding worship war between Jews and Samaritans (v. 20).
 1. It was a war in which both sides appealed to Scripture, though they differed in their approach to and understanding of it.
 2. As they understood the books of Moses, the Samaritans esteemed Shechem and saw Mount Gerizim as the correct place to worship.
 - a) Some passages they cited to support their understanding were also in the Jewish version of the writings.
 - (1) Abram’s first altar was at Shechem (Gen 12:6-7); Jacob also worshiped there (Gen 33:19-20).²
 - (2) Mount Gerizim was the place of blessing when Israel entered the promised land (Deut 11:29; 27:12; Josh 8:33).
 - b) That said, the Samaritans and Jews did have different versions of the Pentateuch.
 - (1) After both Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:21, the Samaritan version added a commandment, the one they considered to be the tenth, which mandated worship on Mount Gerizim (the text reads much like Deut 11:30 and 27:2-7).³
 - (2) They also tended to assume that any references to God’s holy mountain must refer to Gerizim and thought that most of the blessed events involving the patri-

² The conversation in John 4 took place at Jacob’s well (vv 5-6).

³ See F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 108-109.

archs occurred there, including Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and his blessing by Melchizedek.

(3) With a canon comprised of only the Pentateuch, they rejected texts that named Jerusalem as the place of worship (2 Chron 6:6; 7:12; Ps 78:68).

B. It is important to notice two things about Jesus' response.

1. He affirmed that the Jews were right (vv. 21-22).
2. He said that his covenant would make the location debate moot (vv. 23-24).

II. Letting Jesus Lead the Navigation of Modern Worship Wars.

A. Jesus taught that we could know the right information about worship.

1. Jesus said there was a right answer in the dispute (v. 22) and pointed to a time when worship "must"⁴ be like God's nature (vv. 23-24).
2. As John Calvin said, "we are not to essay anything in religion rashly or unthinkingly. For unless there is knowledge present, it is not God that we worship but a spectre or ghost. Hence all so-called good intentions are struck by this thunderbolt which tells us that men can do nothing but err when they are guided by their own opinion without the Word or command of God."⁵

B. Jesus taught that place and form are secondary (instrumental) to worship that reflects the character of the God we are worshipping (vv. 21, 23-24).

1. For Jesus, the key question was not on which mountain people worshiped, but whether they were the right *kind*⁶ of worshipers.
2. The right kind of worshipers honor the Father in a manner consistent with his nature.

C. Above all, Jesus taught what really matters in worship is God.

1. Right worship is worship "in spirit and truth" because that reflects the nature of God who "is spirit," and also truth (vv. 23-24).
2. Understand that, with the phrase "in spirit and truth," John intended to communicate one idea, not two (contra KJV which has "in spirit and in truth").
 - a) "Both [in v. 23] and in v. 24 the expression is ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ [*en pneumati kai alētheia*]. The linking of the two nouns under a single preposition shows that they belong together" (Morris, 239, note 56).
3. The Hebrew idea of truth involves more than the Greek [Western] view of "truth as opposed to falsehood, reality as opposed to mere appearance" (Morris, 259).
 - a) Hebrew words that refer to truth (e.g., אֱמֶת, *emeth*) "also refer to faithfulness, reliability, trustworthiness, sureness, and the like" (Morris, 259).
 - b) Truth goes to the very heart of who God is, his nature and character, not just realities about him or statements he has made and revealed.
4. What does this mean for worship?
 - a) Worship should honor God in a way that is in line with the nature of God.

⁴ The word is δεῖ (*dei*): "impersonal verb *it is necessary, one must or has to . . . ; one ought or should . . . should have, ought to have. . .*" (F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., 42).

⁵ Cited in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Revised Edition, 238, n. 51.

⁶ The word in v. 23 is τοιοῦτος (*toioutos*), "of such a kind, such (as this)" (Gingrich, 201).

- b) This is not to say that form does not matter.
 - (1) To say that shows we have not really paid attention to God; he's never left his people free to worship any way they saw fit.
 - (2) But place and form must be understood in light of his nature and concerns (including concerns related to his body, his people).
 - c) Since it has to do with the nature of God, the phrase "in spirit and truth" surely refers to something more than checking off the "right acts," or even observing the correct forms/rituals in the right ways.
 - d) Jesus' emphasis on God also points to the importance of seeing that our edification is less the purpose of our worship than its by-product.
 - e) In other words, the more our worship activities focus on God, the more complete will be our transformation into the image of God.
5. Thus, we should aim to make our worship a time of reflection on and devotion to God where we really "take time to be holy," not merely a duty we've completed when we have done the expected "acts of worship."⁷

Conclusion

1. One writer has noted the connection between worship and "the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal life," pointing out that, "If the [church] wants to regain [its] vitality, [the] first step must be to . . . provide compelling answers to the question, 'What's so special about Christianity?'"⁸
2. It will be in worshipping God that we are most often reminded of what the answer is. That's why we must talk about worship, and must worship in spirit and truth. The strength of our relationship with our Father and one another, our well being, and the vitality of our mission demand it.

⁷ Thus, I designed this series to include several sermons on the *nature* of worship before turning to the *acts* of worship.

⁸ Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time*, 46.