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INTRODUCTION

All over the world, wherever human beings are found, they worship.

Travelling back from Australia some years ago, I stopped to visit friends in Bangladesh. It was the time of both the Muslim festival of Eid and the Hindu Durga Puja. The streets ran red with blood from bulls sacrificed in every basement of every Muslim home, while at the same time parades and services were being held to honour a multi-breasted, colourful Hindu goddess.

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'worship' as: 'A feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity', or, 'Great admiration or devotion shown towards a person or a principle'. Worship is not restricted simply to God-fearers; atheists also worship.

Sydney had been the starting point of my journey home from Australia. It has been said that the people of Sydney worship the good life: pleasure. If you have ever been there, you will have seen why – it is truly beautiful, with so much to enjoy. The end of my journey was the City of London, the business centre of Europe. The people of the Square Mile in London are said to worship

Mammon. Recently, I was in Woking watching Woking Football Club play Maidstone. For some inexplicable reason, people worship Woking Football Club too.

All over the world, wherever we find human existence, people worship.

When I preached the contents of this book (as a series of sermons to the congregation of St Helen's at the start of 2018), I began my preparation by going back to first principles and asking myself what the Bible has to say about worship. As Christians, our worship should be shaped by God's word. I decided to choose four foundational passages from the New Testament from four different authors: the Apostle John, the Apostle Paul, the author to the Hebrews, and the Apostle Peter.

Of course, we cannot cover everything in such a short book, but I want us to ask whether our understanding of worship is what God teaches in the Bible. If we use words from the Bible in a way that the Bible does not, there is a danger that we will end up wrongly thinking that we are doing something that the Bible encourages and that pleases God; in reality, all we could be doing is using biblical words to justify our unbiblical practices. I call this 'reverse engineering', where we read back into the Bible what our current practice is, assuming that we are currently doing what God asks us to do. Reverse engineering can be very misleading.

There can be few cases where reverse engineering is more widely practised than in our understanding and practice of worship. That's why I have entitled the

book *Revolutionary Worship*. Not only is the Christian understanding of ‘worship’ revolutionary when compared to all other worship in the world, but the biblical understanding of worship is also revolutionary because often it contrasts markedly with what passes as Christian practice even in our so-called ‘evangelical’ or ‘reformed’ circles. The gospel of the Lord Jesus radically challenges what is regarded as ‘worship’.

True worship is a response to what God has already done, which we hear about in God’s word. True worship embraces all of life in all the world to the glory of God. The purpose of our meeting together is to hear the truth of the gospel, to encourage one another in this truth, to thank God for it, and to ask for his help as we go out into the world to worship.

The reader of this book may find the way it is written a little unusual. Generally, we anticipate each new chapter in a book will make a new point. In this book, however, each chapter will make essentially the same point: namely that the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus has revolutionised our worship such that it involves the whole of our life. The book’s aim is to show that this is the consistent message of all the New Testament writers. Thus, as we explore each passage of Scripture, we shall find very similar points being made. The big challenge for us, however, will be whether we are prepared to reshape what we do when we meet, and the language we use as we do so, to be in line with what we discover in the Bible.

PLEASING WORSHIP

JOHN 4:1-26

4:¹Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ²(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ³he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' ⁸(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?' (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he

would have given you living water.’ ¹¹The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?’ ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.’ ¹³Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ ¹⁵The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.’

¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here.’ ¹⁷The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.’ ¹⁹The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.’ ²¹Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must

worship in spirit and truth.’²⁵The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.’²⁶Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’

The story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 is described by one writer as ‘arguably the most definitive teaching on worship in the whole of the New Testament.’¹ It teaches us the worship that pleases God. Furthermore, it makes clear that such worship is possible now because of Jesus, as he declares: ‘the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him’ (v. 23). Jesus’ arrival on earth established this new time of worship.

MOUNTAINS AND TEMPLES: THE WORSHIP JESUS REPLACES

Verses 19 to 22 show us that Jesus replaces both unauthorised pagan worship and the authorised temple worship of God in Jerusalem.

Until recently, I have always thought that when the woman raised the issue of worship in verse 19, she was employing diversionary tactics in order to get Jesus off her case. After all, in his conversation with the woman, Jesus has got ‘up close and personal’, pointing out that she has had five husbands already, and that the relationship she is living in at the moment is adulterous. So, I had always

assumed that the woman raised the subject of worship – a hot topic even in Jesus’ day – in order to take the attention away from her sex life.

However, as I looked again at John 4, I found that line of thinking less persuasive. It seems more likely that the woman knows precisely what Jesus has been claiming about himself right from the opening verses of this conversation. Jesus has been speaking about himself in relation to Jacob. He has offered the woman a new kind of spiritual water coming from within that wells up to eternal life. Jesus has been offering the woman a whole new existence with him that would satisfy truly in a way that nothing else in her life ever had. Jesus has offered her a new kind of life *from* God in a relationship *with* God that is continually sustained *by* God moment by moment, day by day. Once we realise that this has been the subject of the conversation from the beginning, it seems that Jesus has really been talking about true worship right from the start. If that is the case, then we have to conclude that her question is really sincere. She wants to know about true worship.

The word the woman uses for ‘worship’ is the big Bible word meaning literally ‘to kiss towards’. It has nothing to do with romantic thoughts about Jesus. Rather, it originates from the ancient world when, coming in front of a great and supreme being, you fell on your face before them and you kissed the ground as an act of submission, surrender, and obeisance. You might even kiss the hem of their garment or their feet. It is the language of bowing