On Worshiping in Spirit and in Truth

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church or a traditional mountain. We can worship in any place, at home, in a church, in the countryside. What is necessary is a living faith in the Lord, a desire to enter into communion with Him in order to worship Him and to thank Him for all He has done for us.

In the second text we focus on faith in relation to works. Both are very important for an effective witness. Faith has to do with our relationship with God because it brings us assurance of the salvation of our souls. Works are the signs of our experience of God because His love has been poured into our hearts and moves us to do everything that may benefit our neighbours. It is always good for us to reflect on these questions:

1. What is faith? The Bible gives us the answer: It is the assurance that we shall receive what we have been promised. That is why Abraham went out without knowing where he was going, only sure that God would keep His promise.

2. What are works? They are revealed through the tasks that we undertake. In any piece of work one always uses money, time and effort. If the task I have set myself will be of benefit to others I must ask myself: “What do I want to achieve? Recognition as a great philanthropist? For people to say that I am very generous?” If that is the case, I am just thinking of myself and of course I am not pleasing to God. I therefore come to this conclusion: Everything that I have and that I am I owe to God and anything that I can give is my privilege. It gives me satisfaction to be able to bring a little happiness to someone who needs it. We give because we love and we know that it is pleasing to God when we share what we have received through His grace.

God desires that all the Quakers in the world should enjoy a very deep spiritual life and should share it with others. Only in this way shall we grow, by sharing the Christian experience which we have received from God through Jesus Christ. If we hide the light, darkness will prevail, but if we let it shine out many will come to know the way of truth and life.

While we have time, let us do good works. Let us serve others, especially our brothers and sisters in the faith. Let us give with love, because otherwise all we do is worthless. For Paul tells us: “If I sell all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned and have not love, it is of no benefit to me” (I Cor 13:3). So the secret of how to make our offerings acceptable is revealed to us in the word of God.

Translation by Marigold Best.
Mark Hill

writer, John 4:23-24 articulates the central implication of a believing relationship with God. Authentic and transforming worship is spiritual in its character, and because God is a God of Truth, authentic worship involves a believing response to the Truth of God's saving initiative. The Gospel of John develops this motif in basically three ways.

Correctives
First, in order to describe authentic spirituality the Gospel writer makes several correctives, describing what it is not. In the present context (ch 4) at least two distinctions are made regarding the nature of human need and the character of spiritual worship. Jesus offers the women at the well life-producing water, but she misunderstands. She thinks he is offering a never-ending supply of physical water, but the “gift of God” (vs 10) he offers is that spiritual “spring of water which wells up (from within) and brings eternal life with it” (vs 14, see also John 7:37-39). The point being made here by no means diminishes the importance of physical water any more than the discourse on the “bread of life” (John 6:26-58) depreciates the value of physical bread. The author assumes that “bread and water” are clearly necessary for physical sustenance. The contrast being made is to heighten the not-so-clear human need which is spiritual. In other words, even the most basic of human needs, hunger and thirst, are ultimately reflections of the fundamental human need: the need for God.

The other corrective launched by this passage has to do with the inherent limitations of human-made religion. The day has arrived, declares Jesus, that authentic worship is not limited to a holy place or a particular form. Despite the Samaritans’ reverence for Mount Gerizim3 and the Jews’ belief that the Temple in Jerusalem was the spiritual centre of the world, God’s final communication is through a human being: Jesus. Human attempts to reach God are bankrupt in contrast to the ways God has reached out to humanity, and according to John this is done most fully in the Father’s sending of the Son as a universal statement of love for the world (3:16). To respond believingly to the one who is sent is also to receive the sender. Regarding the essence of human need and the effectiveness of religious life, the evangelist corrects conventional notions and points to the spiritual character of God as the Source and Sustainer of all.

Worship which transforms
A second emphasis of John 4:23-24 is to offer a constructive portrayal of the spiritual means by which true worshippers might engage in worship which is authentic and transforming. As a contrast to those who avoid the truth about themselves, God and others (John 3:18-21), the Spirit of Truth leads people into all truth (John 16:7-13), and the Truth sets them free (John 8:32). For those who open themselves to God’s Truth and receive it believingly, these receive the right to become the children of God (1:12), and they are born “from above” (3:4).4 This new birth is often misunderstood by well-meaning Christians who equate it with the result of ascribing to a cluster of beliefs. The context of John 3:1-21, however, makes
it clear that being born again involves being filled with and led by the Spirit of God (vs 8), and in John 14-16 this Spirit is identified explicitly as the Spirit of the risen Christ.

The point of all this is an “experimental” one, to use George Fox’s term. According to John’s Gospel, worship is not simply an activity we initiate, but a transforming encounter with God into which we are led by the Spirit of Truth. Thus, the controversial claim that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life”, without which no one comes to the Father (14:6) is often misunderstood as exclusivity, when the intended meaning may have been one of functionality. Other means of living in the life of the Spirit remain lacking, not because of some divine boycott; rather, they fail because their origin is human, not divine. The only focus of life-producing spirituality is the spiritual presence of God, which according to John continues the teaching ministry of the departed Jesus (14:26), comforts us with his peace (14:27), convicts of sin and righteousness (16:7-11), and leads us into all Truth (16:12). Those who abide in the Truth recognize this voice, perhaps even before they know of the outward story. Indeed, one of the great Quaker insights is the recognition that the Gospel of Christ extends beyond the boundaries of outward “Christian” appearance. The present Spirit of Christ is like a wind which blows where it will (John 3:5-7), whose effect cannot be contained, only embraced or rejected. Authentic and spiritual worship involves an unceasing acceptance of God’s loving initiative and an ongoing expression of one’s loving adoration to God. This is the spiritual essence of both baptism and communion: an abiding immersion in the transforming presence of the Spirit of God.

Affecting our daily lives

To encounter the presence of God is to be changed, and such a change affects the ways we live in the world. This is the third point made by John’s portrayal of authentic spirituality. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a co-worker in his healing/saving work in the world. His “kingdom” (government) is neither established nor maintained by force, but by Truth (John 18:36-38). To further this eternal government is to do so nonviolently, and to be responsive to Jesus’ leadings is to become one of his “friends”. The central implication of living in the Truth, however, is to love one another after the manner of Jesus’ example (John 15:12-17).

Here is where spiritual vitality and radical social ministry converge. The only way to follow Jesus is to abide in him, as the branch is connected to the vine, while this relationship will also be judged by its fruit. The one who does not love others he has seen, cannot claim legitimately to love God, whom he has not. To be transformed spiritually is to be called to be a healer of brokenness in the world. This is one of the foundational insights of Quakerism, and as Neave Brayshaw has said, the Society of Friends “has rediscovered, neither easily nor quickly, the truth that it exists not for itself, but for the world’s healing”.6

In preparation for the 1991 World Conference such a theme as “in Spirit and in Truth” is definitely appropriate, given the wide diversity of Quaker beliefs and forms of worship around the world. Indeed, this theme from the Gospel of John provides a way forward. For the Friend who is staunchly convinced of the absolute correctness of his or her beliefs and practices, as well as the Friend who has become allergic to such unreflective approaches to Truth, the message is clear. The movement of God’s Spirit can never be limited to forms, or even formlessness. Authentic spirituality begins and ends with the ongoing search for God’s Truth, and such worshippers are even sought by God. As the epistle of another Quaker gathering over a century ago put it,7 “Worship is the adoring response of the heart and mind to the influence of the Spirit of God. It stands neither in forms nor in the formal disguise of forms . . . it must be in Spirit and in Truth” (John 4:24).□

1 Heinz Cassirer’s new translation, God’s New Covenant (edited by Ronald Weitzman, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) is excellent for its lucidity and insight, and is comparable to Phillips’ in its quality.
3 Samaritans believed that Moses’ original commandments and other sacred relics were hidden on this mountain, and such beliefs were used to justify worshipping at the northern site of Samaria, rather than in Jerusalem.
4 The Greek word anothen means both “again” and “from above”. While the need for a second birth is stated, the transcendent origin of this new birth is clearly implied.
5 The Greek word sôzein means “to save” or “to rescue”, but it also means “to heal”. This implies a more comprehensive understanding of the Gospel which includes social, physical and spiritual dimensions.
7 Taken from the “Richmond Declaration of Faith”, 1987.