

306 “In spirit and in truth”

In John Chapter 4 Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman by the well at Sychar – “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (vv 23-24, KJV). What do these familiar words of Jesus, “in spirit and in truth”, actually mean in practice for Christ’s disciples today?

To start with, “the hour had now come” - everything had changed because He, Jesus, the Messiah, was now here! (John 4.25-26). It was time for “new wineskins” to be used for this wonderful new wine (eg Matthew 9.17), meaning in essence that the emphasis in the worship of God was to swing from outward rituals to the inward heart.

Throughout His life on this earth Jesus was a faithful Jew, observing the rituals of the Mosaic Law and its annual feasts. In so doing He knew how these original God-given rituals, given by God to express the covenant and many of which pointed forward to Jesus Himself as the Lamb of God, had gradually degenerated into mere Man-driven RUT-uals! Time and again the Old Testament prophets were sent to God’s people to warn that they were simply “going through the motions” in their worship of the Lord: outwardly everything might look right and proper, but inwardly it had become spiritually dead, with legalism, idolatry and immorality rife among the people (egs., Isaiah 1.1-15 / Jeremiah 14.10-12 / Amos 2.4-13 / ...).

Jesus found this same attitude in His encounters with the religious authorities of His day, denouncing them - “Ye hypocrites!” – for their legalistic, rut-uualistic ways (Matthew 15.7-9, from Isaiah 29.13); it was men such as these who had allowed the temple to become “a den of thieves” (Mark 11.15-17).

What of our own day? - in which the corporate expression of the Christian Faith takes so many forms: majestic liturgical, choral worship in a soaring medieval cathedral; a joyful, noisy informal gathering in an African village; a simple Word-based meeting in a Non-Conformist chapel; a confident newer fellowship in a school hall with its music group and modern visual aids; and others. As far as the Lord is concerned, with His teaching of our need to worship God the Father “in spirit and in truth”, in which of the above Christian settings does He feel most at home, if any?! To put it another way, to which sort of occasion would Jesus Himself choose to go on a typical Sunday morning were He still physically present with us?!

The answer is pretty clear: He can be at home in any of them, IF !

The Lord is not primarily concerned with any of the visible outward details – the building, the people, the format, the ritual, the liturgy, the music, the visual aids.

What matters most to Him, very simply, is the state of the people’s hearts. The Lord explained to Samuel in Jesse’s house (I Samuel 16.7b) - “for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart”. He accepts “the broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51.17 and Isaiah 57.15), the lips which are truthful (Psalm

17.1), the person “in whose spirit there is no guile” (Psalm 32.2), and the one who has “truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51.6).

Jesus honours the widow with her two mites (Mark 12.41-44), and the publican who admits what he is and cries out for mercy (Luke 18.9-14). He receives the little children, and the poor wretch on the adjacent cross (Luke 18.15-17 and 23.39-43). And He still receives those who respond to His call, take Him at His word, put their faith and trust in Him, and take up their own cross each day in love and service (John 3.16 / Romans 10.9-13 / Matthew 10.38).

If the hearts of the people are not right before the Lord, no Christian gathering, how ever grand or simple, formal or informal, traditional or modern, its outward customs may be, is immune from drifting imperceptibly into that spiritually-dead ritualism that can be hard to detect because things may still look fine on the outside.

Equally, the Lord of course loves to bless any genuine Christian fellowship, for He has promised, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18.20). Wherever and whenever He sees that the people truly seek Him, know Him and love Him, and hence are worshipping Him “in spirit and in truth”, being open to His presence among them by the Holy Spirit, then, praise God, His blessings are ready to flow!

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