

What Makes Christian Worship Different?

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After the Beatles disbanded in 1970, lead guitarist George Harrison pursued an active spiritual life nearly fulltime. Transcendental meditation guided his pursuit, but he was not judgmental of another paths. His belief system allowed for many paths to enlightenment. Late that year, this conviction inspired him to compose *My Sweet Lord*, a song in which Hindu mantras were mixed interchangeably with Christian acclamations. To Harrison the difference between singing “*Hare Rama*”, and “*Hallelujah*” was merely phonetic, being superficial to cosmic reality.

After its release, *My Sweet Lord* became an immediate success. It had been a daring and novel move. While its musical content was rather ordinary, (he was later sued for copyright infringement), its overall concept was anything but ordinary. *My Sweet Lord* was novel because it was worship. The idea that a hit record could be made out of worship was absolutely unprecedented. But the tune was catchy, and people in that war-torn era were captured by the idea that all human beings might share a common religious experience; that religious labels and doctrine were merely superficial and manmade.

The Challenge

Since then, this syncretistic idea has gained almost universal acceptance in popular culture. By asserting that all religious paths lead to the same destiny, syncretism offers the promise of reconciling religious

differences, promoting acceptance and tolerance among disparate cultures. Yet for Christians it presents an uncomfortable challenge to the uniqueness of our faith and worship. For us to claim that our worship experience is unlike any other simply sounds narrow-minded, arrogant, even bigoted. After all, who are we to claim that our worship is somehow different from that of anyone else who is “a good person”, with a religious life that “works for them”?

Socially incorrect as it is, conveying that difference graciously to those around us is precisely what we are called to do. It is a divine mandate as part of the Great Commission. It is as inescapable as it is uncomfortable for us to proclaim that worshipping Jesus as Divine Redeemer has no equivalent in human experience. Our task then is to make the distinction clear, first in our own minds, and then in the minds of others.

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The Answer

Nowhere is the distinctive of Christian worship seen more clearly than in the fourth chapter of Saint John's Gospel, a narrative which constitutes the inaugural text for all Christian worshipers. This account begins with Jesus and his disciples arriving in the Samaritan town of Sychar in their journey from Jerusalem to Galilee. Weary from travel, Jesus rested at a well, and asked a Samaritan woman for a drink. She was astounded by Christ's request because it was common knowledge that Jewish law forbade any contact with

Samaritans. Furthermore, this law specifically prohibited the use of utensils that had been used by Samaritans. Thus, assuming that Christ would never accept a drink from her utensil, the Samaritan woman asked in John 4:9, “How can you ask me for a drink?”

But Jesus’ response was equally surprising, declaring, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

When the woman asked for this living water, the situation became awkward as Jesus suggested that her husband may also want it. When she responded with the half-truth, “I have no husband”, Jesus supernaturally (and privately) exposed the central moral failing of her life. “You are right...”, he declared, “...you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

What transpired next (in verses 19-20) is often misinterpreted in Bible commentaries. After acknowledging the veracity of Jesus’ prophetic insight, she asked a curious question about where to worship. To some this may seem a diversion. But in the context of their culture she could not have made a clearer confession, because she was asking where to atone for her sin in a valid manner.

Although Jews and Samaritans disagreed on where the atoning sacrifice should be made, Gerizim in Samaria or Jerusalem in Judea, they did agree on one central principle exemplified in Leviticus 17:11: “it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” They knew that unless the matter of sin and

atonement was settled, all other liturgical issues were moot. Thus, the relationship between worship and atonement was, and still is, the central issue of faith.

Jesus’ answer must have astounded this contrite woman. For instead of instructing her to make a pilgrimage of atonement to the temple in Jerusalem, as would be expected of an orthodox rabbi like Jesus, he declared (in verse 21), “Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”

Then after acknowledging that salvation would come only from the Jewish tradition, he went on to declare (in verse 23-24), “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

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With this extraordinary statement, the Son of God swept away centuries of tradition, establishing a new paradigm for drawing near to God, by invoking higher principles from the Old Testament. With this declaration Jesus Christ inaugurated Christian worship, setting it apart as completely unique in human experience. Dissecting Christ’s statement will identify six characteristics that differentiate Christian worship from all other devotional systems. In this process we can contrast Christ’s language and implicit assumptions with those of the Samaritan woman. This becomes relevant today because her assumptions exemplify concepts that are widely accepted today by many churchgoers and even some clergy.

Divine Initiative “for the Father seeks”

Christian worship is unique because it begins with God seeking man, rather than man seeking God. The premise behind the Samaritan woman’s inquiry is that the penitent worshiper initiates the process of atonement that leads eventually to

reconciliation. But Divine initiative in Christian worship demands that man cannot initiate this process.

This is clear throughout Scripture. After feeding the five thousand, for example, Jesus said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him” (John 6:44). Because of Divine initiative the apostle Paul could confidently write to the Roman Christians, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Thus, long before we engaged in any kind of religious activity, our heavenly Father was pursuing us vigorously.

The word, “for”, in the quotation from John 4:23 establishes an unbreakable causal link between Divine initiative and Christian worship. In other words: No Divine initiative, no Christian worship. People can and do initiate worship, but they cannot initiate Christian worship. Therefore, authentic Christian worship is our positive response to a divinely initiated pursuit.

Divine Relationship “Father”

“Father” is a very important word in our narrative. Actually our Samaritan woman was the one who used it first in the eleventh verse. She also referred to “our fathers” in verse twenty. Jesus, seizing the syntactic opportunity, made “the Father” central in his dissertation. Of course, the difference is that she was referring to ancestors as an impersonal tradition, while Christ was talking about a personal relationship with “Father”. Tradition and ceremony play a role in all worship, but are ancillary to Christian worship. While Christian worship can connect us institutionally with the past, its essential characteristic is that it connects us

personally with the Father in a present relationship.

Divine Nature “in spirit”

In her question about worship and atonement, the Samaritan woman spoke in finite terms of religious places and procedures. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke in infinite terms of Divine nature. She spoke of space. He spoke of spirit.

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Jesus explained that true worshipers must worship “in spirit”, because “spirit” is what God is. Since “spirit” describes a personal quality, it addresses more who God is, rather than where God is. Jesus wanted her to understand that the atoning currency of heaven is spiritual, not temporal. Because of sin, human action, no matter how noble or religious, can never tip the scales of divine justice in man’s favor. For us, it would be like trying to spend American dollars in France.

This quality is completely unique to Christian worship.

In all other religious systems, the worship itself is the atonement, seeking to gain cosmic favor, religious fulfillment, or spiritual consciousness. Christian worship, on the other hand, seeks neither to gain divine favor, nor to appease divine wrath through atonement.

The only valid atoning currency in the courts of heaven is the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God. Given this fact, Jesus Christ was the first to worship the Father “in spirit”. Hebrews 9:14 declares that Christ, “through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God.” The only way we can worship the Father “in spirit”, is through

Christ as mediator. Christian worship is the only worship that is separate from the process of atonement.

Divine Covenant “in truth”

This simply means that Christian worship must be free from pretense. That is why Jesus addressed the woman’s sin. He knew that for her to have the living water of salvation, she had to “be real” about whom she was, just as he was “real” about whom he was.

Christian worship is unique in that it requires genuineness, under divine covenant, on the part of both the worshiper and the worshiped. All other religious systems bind only the worshiper in devotional covenant, leaving the cosmic object of worship free to act arbitrarily. Christ is the only object of worship that actually makes and keeps covenant promises.

Divine Grace “the water I give”

We have already seen that our worship cannot please God because it is human action, not spiritual currency. Psalm 49:8 says, “the ransom for a life is too costly, no payment is ever enough...”. That is why the water of life must be a gift. When Jesus said, “the water I give”, (verse 14), he liberated Christian worship unconditionally from religious performance. This means that our worship seeks not to appease God, but to celebrate God as our Redeemer.

Divine Indwelling “will become in him”

All other religious systems require on-going religious performance by the worshiper. As

the Samaritan woman depended on the well, likewise the non-Christian worshiper is bound to devotional discipline for atonement and validation. But the incredible mystery of Christian worship is that it frees us from that kind of dependency.

Christians should worship Jesus Christ not because we need to, but because we love to. For the non-Christian, worship is a cosmic remittance requiring renewal. For the Christian, it is a divine love song celebrating the perpetual gift of salvation.

The Difference

The God Squad was a popular TV show hosted by a Catholic priest, Msgr. Thomas Hartman, and Rabbi Marc Gellman. In one interview, each was asked to summarize his faith. Rev. Hartman explained succinctly that Christians depend upon the blood of Jesus Christ for atonement. Rabbi Gellman quickly differentiated Judaism by saying, “In Judaism, the individual atones for himself.” The same could be said of any other belief system.

Hebrews 13:15 describes our worship as a unique response to Christ’s redemption by urging, “Through Christ, therefore, let us offer to God a sacrifice of praise...”

For further thoughts on this Scripture passage please see the article
Evangelism: Worship on Tour

