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# *Covenant Reformed News*

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## **The Spirituality of God (3)**

The truth of the spirituality of God (John 4:24) places a holy calling upon us. First, God's spirituality is the deathblow to all idolatry. Whereas the unity of God underlies the first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3), the spirituality of God is the basis for the second commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments" (4-6).

All pagan idolatry is prohibited. Man must worship the Creator and not any creature (Rom. 1:23, 25). "Christian" idols are forbidden also, such as Roman Catholic statues or pictures of any of the Persons of the Holy Trinity or Eastern Orthodox icons of Christ. It is no good saying, "We do not adore the physical representations. We merely worship God through them." The pagans say exactly the same thing!

Second, God's spirituality means that all worship must be spiritual and inner. This is Christ's own teaching in John 4:24: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." The second use of the word "spirit" refers to *man's* spirit. Worship that is not hypocritical but sincere, true and genuine is required. It must be spiritual worship arising from our spirit or heart so that we mean what we say. For this, our human spirits need the Holy Spirit, for we are totally sinful of ourselves and He alone can work the necessary graces and virtues in us.

To express this slightly differently, living faith is necessary, for it is the inward power that enables us truly to worship the one true God. Faith deals with invisible and spiritual realities revealed in the Word, and "without faith it is impossible to please [or worship] him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). Thus the new birth is essential for true worship because regeneration begets faith, without which we cannot praise and serve the Almighty.

Commenting on John 4:24, J. C. Ryle writes, "The importance of the great principle laid down in this and the preceding verse can never be overrated. Any religious teaching which tends to depreciate heart-worship, and to turn Christianity into a mere formal service, or which tends to bring back Jewish shadows, ceremonies and services, and to introduce them into Christian worship, is on the face of these remarkable verses most unscriptural and deserving of reprobation."

Third, God's spirituality means that all worship must be regulated according to the Word of God. As our Lord says, our worship must be not only "in spirit" but also "in truth." "What doth God require in the second commandment? That we in no wise represent God by images, nor worship

Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word" (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 96).

Since God is spirit and we are sinful, we are blindness itself as regards knowing how we ought to worship Him. As our Lord said, "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). Thus the God who is pure spirit writes Scripture by His Holy Spirit to reveal what worship pleases Him.

This is called the regulative principle of worship. The regulative principle teaches that the church's worship must include Christian prayer, the two sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper), offerings, the singing of the inspired Psalms (Ps. 95:2; Col. 3:16) and especially preaching. In the faithful proclamation of the gospel, Jesus Christ is "evidently set forth, crucified among you" (Gal. 3:1). The incarnate, crucified and risen Christ reveals, and leads us to know and worship, the spiritual God (John 1:18; 14:6), for He is the express image of the invisible One (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

The *Westminster Confession* gives a fuller treatment of the biblical elements of worship according to the regulative principle: "The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner" (21:5).

Now let us return to the Samaritan woman in John 4. Here the Saviour instructed her that acceptable worship is not a matter of a "holy" place (such as Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem) or a location with a physical connection to the church fathers (such as Jacob's well). Especially in the New Testament age, these things are, at best, irrelevant: "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" (23).

The Lord Jesus taught the Samaritan woman that true and acceptable worship must be "in spirit" (from the heart) and "in truth" (according to the Word of God) and therefore offered by one who is walking in obedience. Thus, one cannot live in adultery (like the Samaritan woman) and bring to Jehovah the sacrifice of praise. Those who enter God's courts with adoration must have "clean hands, and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:4).

Christ declared to the Samaritan woman and to us that the Triune God seeks such to worship Him (John 4:23). This is not to be understood in an Arminian sense, as if God earnestly desires and tries His best to convert everybody (and fails miserably with respect to most people). Rather, as the absolutely sovereign God, He effectually seeks, i.e., desires and so creates, such worshippers, as Christ did with the Samaritan woman that memorable day at Jacob's well in Sychar. *Rev. Stewart*

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## Singing in the Old Testament

A reader from Portugal asks, "Did the people in the Old Testament sing the Psalms too or was it just the Levites?"

We read in the Bible of the angels singing at the creation (Job 38:7) but the brother is asking specifically about human beings. Singing has always been a part of man's worship of God. It was especially a part of divine worship at the temple. But it seems from the data of Scripture that singing was not confined to the corporate worship of Jehovah; nor was it confined to the Psalms, for there were a few specific occasions in which inspired praise was sung in celebration of recent mighty acts of God.

Moses and the children of Israel sang a song after their deliverance from the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:1-19). The congregation itself sang and the song they sang was given at the time they sang it. Afterwards, Miriam the prophetess led the women in dancing and singing the same song (20-21).

Barak and Deborah, who were not Levites, sang a song at the destruction of the Canaanites in Judges 5. It is doubtful whether Barak and Deborah sang a duet; probably they composed the song and led the victorious Israelites in singing it.

In I Samuel 18:6-7, we read that the women sang a song of triumph celebrating Saul's and David's slaying the Philistines. Strikingly, women are highlighted in the three examples of singing just cited: Miriam and the women at the Red Sea, Deborah and the women from "all [the] cities of Israel" (6)—not only the Levitical cities.

At the time of the erection of the temple, music became much more prominent and took on a more fixed form. David, who organized the work in the temple, also appointed professional musicians for the worship of God. He and the musicians wrote the Psalms to be used in worship in the temple.

I quote a few short excerpts from the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), pp. 314-315:

"In the accounts in Chronicles, which give the statistics of the Temple ministries, 4,000 of the 36,000 Levites chosen by David for Temple service were musicians (I Chron. 15:16; 23:5).

These were the 'singers who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals to raise sounds of joy.'

"... The choir consisted of a minimum of twelve adult male singers, the maximum limitless. The singers served between the age of thirty and fifty with a five-year training period preceding this.

"... Although a good part of the musical performance must have been left to the trained singers and players, the congregation was also musically involved."

Although the Psalms were written especially for the Levites in the worship of God in the temple, they were also intended to be sung by individuals from all tribes, such as the men who went up to Jerusalem to keep the pilgrimage feasts (Ps. 120-134). Many of the Psalms are written in the first person singular and are, therefore, the personal confession of a child of God, male or female, who pours out his or her soul to God.

Further, it is not difficult to imagine that David, who was of the tribe of Judah, wrote Psalm 23 as a young man while out in the pasture with his lyre taking care of his father's sheep. Nor is it difficult to imagine David penning the words of some of his Psalms as he was trying to find a safe place to hide when Saul was seeking his life.

So it seems reasonable to assume that the Psalms, when written, were the songs that Israel sang, either in temple worship or in family devotions or alone with God.

When our Lord had eaten His last Passover with His disciples and had changed that Old Testament feast to the New Testament Lord's Supper, we read that they sang a hymn (Matt. 26:30). This hymn that they sang was not what is meant today by a "hymn," but was the singing of Psalms 113-118. The Last Supper was, of course, held in Old Testament days, for the New Testament did not come until Christ had finished His work and had given the fullness of the Spirit to His church at Pentecost. Nevertheless, this singing by Christ and His disciples, most of whom were probably not Levites, was from the Old Testament Psalter, and was sung outside the temple services.

Many understand the various inspired utterances in Luke 1-2 to be songs: the Magnificat spoken by Mary of Judah's tribe (1:46-55), when she learned she would bear the Messiah, which is similar to Hannah's prayer when she was given a son (I Sam. 2:1-10); Levitical priest Zacharias' prophecy when he was released from his dumbness (Luke 1:67-80); the angels praise on Bethlehem's hillside at the birth of Christ (2:13-14).

In the New Testament, the Spirit is given to all the saints, and singing is an important part of one's spiritual life that He works in us. All are to sing: men, as well as women; children and teenagers, as well as adults.

Paul, a Benjamite (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5), and Silas sang "praises" to God in the prison in Philippi (Acts 16:25)—Psalms that both Jews learned in their earliest days. Undoubtedly singing was a part of congregational worship, for Paul admonishes the saints in Ephesus and in Colossae to sing by the power of the Spirit and with the grace in the heart—and to one another (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

All singing is not limited to corporate worship, for James gives inspired personal advice to the saints when he instructs us to sing Psalms when we are happy (Jam. 5:13).

Singing is a wonderful gift of God. We can express all that lies in our hearts in singing in a way it is impossible to express apart from singing. Singing always has about it and conveys through it sanctified emotions that give a genuineness to our expressions of various aspects of our salvation. We cry out to God for help in trouble; we beg forgiveness when we sin; we marvel in awe at the wonders of God's creation and at the miracle of our own salvation; we lift up our voices in praise and thanksgiving to Him who dwells on high. Singing can do this in a way prose cannot. It is a great gift. Let us sing with understanding and to God's glory (Ps. 47:7)! *Prof.*

*Hanko*

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### **Covenant Protestant Reformed Church**

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