

Jesus and the Woman at the Well: Where Mission Meets Worship

Introduction

The purpose of the fourth gospel is explicit and well known: that those who hear it might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief they might have life in his name (John 20:31). As such, the engendering of faith which leads to eternal life lies at the very heart of John's purpose. Eternal life, however, is not simply something which we will inherit at our death or receive at our Lord's second coming, but it is the very present possession of God's people. Jesus makes this clear, saying, "He who hears my word and believes the One who sent me has eternal life, . . . and has [already] crossed over from death to life" (5:24). Even now the believer has streams of living water flowing from within (4:14). Indeed, the one "who lives and believes in [Christ] will never die" (11:26). More so than any other evangelist, John would have us understand that eternal life already belongs to everyone who trusts in him who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (14:6). Since eternal life is a present reality, we do well to consider how this life is defined, and what it looks like.

John's Apocalypse: An Eternal Life of Worship

For a picture of eternal life, we customarily turn to John's other great work, the Apocalypse. In his Revelation, John the Divine offers a tantalizing glimpse into the heavenly realities, an extraordinary preview of the life to come. Once we adjust our vision to the technicolor landscape of golden streets and jewel-laden walls, we see that eternal life is defined by Christ-centered worship. John invites us to gather around the Lamb slain for the sin of the world. With people from every nation we sing the songs of angels, sit by the life-giving,

crystalline river, and eat from the tree of healing. John describes heavenly worship as a marriage feast in all its glory (Rev 19:7).

If, however, the Apocalypse offers us a picture of worship drawn from the heavenly perspective, so also, I would suggest, John's gospel offers us an introduction to heavenly worship, as we experience it here, on earth. Throughout the gospel of John we see that Christ's own evangelism and teaching prepares the would-be believer for a life of eternal worship. And this worship begins not when we die, or when our Lord returns, but even now. Heavenly worship, like eternal life itself, is, for the Christian, a present reality. Even now we are invited to stand in the presence of Christ, who is himself the true lamb, the new temple, the source of life-giving waters, and the long-awaited bridegroom.

As such, evangelism and worship, I would suggest, are not easily separated. Indeed, they form a type of natural continuum, even as courtship leads to marriage. So, it is that our Lord says to the Samaritan woman, "But the hour is coming, and is **now** here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him" (4:23). Let us then turn to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

Jesus' Encounter with the Samaritan Woman: The Intersection Between Evangelism and Worship

Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well (John 4:1-42), is one of the most beloved stories in the gospels. Many have turned to this well-crafted narrative as a prime example of evangelism and outreach.¹ The one, who through his incarnation breaks down the barriers

¹See, for instance, Johannes Nissen, "Mission in the Fourth Gospel: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives," *New Readings in John* (eds. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred

between God and man, now begins to bridge the gaps which separate fallen humanity.

Missiologists commonly observe that in this story Jesus crosses over a number of cultural bridges: the holy, Jewish man reaches out to a sinful, Samaritan woman.² Along the way, he breaks down barriers of holiness, ethnicity, gender, and religion. Moreover, by offering the gift of salvation to the fallen Samaritan woman, the Lord shows that there is hope for all of us. He is indeed the Savior of the World.³

Less frequently commented upon, however, is the fact that this text also offers a beautiful picture of the intersection between mission and worship. Christ, as God's best missionary, at once reaches out to the Samaritan woman, but he also draws her in. Rather than leaving her in the purgatorial limbo of the seeker-service, he draws her to himself, into a place from which living waters flow, and true bread is discovered. In short, he draws her into his church, where alone there is worship of the Father, marked by Spirit and Truth.

Worship and Courtship

Pedersen, Sheffield, 1999) 213-232. See also, Tesera Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission* (Tübingen:J.C.B Mohr, 1988) esp. 79-196.

²See Robert Maccini's *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses according to John* (JSNTS 125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) esp. 118-144.

³See Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr) esp. 184-185.

If John the Divine describes heaven as a wedding feast at which Christ is the groom and the church is his bride, we should not be surprised that in his gospel he depicts evangelism as a type of courtship which leads to marriage.

Indeed, a growing number of scholars have come to see the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman as a Johannine variation on an OT betrothal story. According to Robert Alter, the typical OT betrothal scene consists of the five following elements: 1) The future bridegroom or his surrogate travels to a foreign land (Just as Jesus himself traveled to Samaria, with its very different customs, 2) He encounters a girl at the well (here, in an ironic twist Jesus encounters not a girl, but a woman, who is, shall we say, experienced, 3) Someone draws water from the well (in John's story, there is instead, a lengthy discussion about drawing water, 4) The girl rushes home to tell her family about the strange man (here the Samaritan woman also runs home to tell the others about Jesus, and 5) The strange man is invited to a family meal and a betrothal is concluded between the stranger and the girl (in this case, after a discussion about a meal, Jesus becomes the focal point of the entire community. And as a result, the Samaritans proclaim him to be the Savior of the Cosmos). Thus in the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, all the elements of OT betrothal are present, but with a number of surprising twists.

Let us then consider more closely the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman as a type of romance. First, consider the setting. The reader, familiar with the OT, would take special note of the fact that the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman takes place at Jacob's well. The well, in OT times, was the place of courtship (a singles-bar, as it were, for the

patriarchs).⁴ It was at a well that Moses met Zipporah (Exodus 2:15-22), and that Abraham's servant found a bride for Isaac (Gen 24:1 ff.). And, of course, it was at a well that Jacob first gazed upon Rachel's lovely eyes, causing his own to weep with joy (Gen 29:1-14).

The story of Jacob's courtship at the well, in particular, remained a popular one in both rabbinic and Hellenistic-Jewish writings. Josephus' own retelling of the Old Testament includes a tender picture of Jacob and Rachel at the well (*Ant.* 1.286-292). Thus, when John tells us that the place of meeting was a well, and at that, Jacob's well, he is not only offering us a geographical detail, but he is preparing us for a particular type of story.

The context also argues for interpreting this story as a courtship. Jesus begins his ministry at Cana, performing his first miracle at a wedding, thus signaling his status as the true bridegroom (John 2). Following the story of the wedding, and immediately preceding the story of the woman at the well, John the Baptist describes his relationship to Christ in matrimonial terms, claiming, "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice" (3:29). Thus, John the Baptist compares his work to that of a best man preparing for the groom, who is Christ. The reader is left to wonder, what kind of groom the Christ will be.

⁴See Jerome Neyrey, "Jacob Traditions and the Interpretation of John 4:10-26," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 419-437.

We should add that not only is a matrimonial theme suggested by the context and setting of the story, but it also plays prominently in the content. Consider the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. After a discussion of water at the well, Jesus abruptly changes the subject, telling the woman to fetch her husband (4:16). The woman replies, as you know, that she has no husband. Undoubtedly, she is embarrassed to reveal her checkered past. Is she also making herself available to a new suitor? Surely, this is not the first, nor would it be the last, time that people would fail to comprehend the words of Jesus. John loves to play with ironic confusion and misunderstanding. What is true bread? True water? Who is truly blind and who can truly see? As representative of the Jewish people Nicodemus was confused as to the nature of heavenly birth. The context leads the reader to wonder whether the Samaritan woman was still thinking in earthly terms, leaving herself open for a sixth marriage and a husband who could finally make her happy. In a provocative article, now some forty years old, John Bligh puts it this way, “Perhaps she is another example of persons who want Christ for the wrong reason. The first word which he addresses to his prospective followers is: ‘What do you want?’ (1:38). The Galileans come to him wanting bread and fish (cf. 6:26); he offers them the true bread, which is himself. The woman standing before him wanting, perhaps only half-consciously, marriage; he offers her instead the reality of which marriage is a figure.”⁵

Indeed, when the disciples returned from their trip to the city to buy bread, they too may have misunderstood the situation. Though they were too embarrassed to say it, they were “amazed that he was talking to a woman,” and wanted to ask, “What are you looking for?” and “Why are you talking with her?” (4:27) The problematic issue for the disciples, most

⁵John Bligh, “Jesus in Samaria,” *Heythrop Journal* 3 (1962) 335-336.

interestingly, is not that Jesus is talking to a Samaritan, but to a woman. **Representative of common opinion on the subject, Rabbi Nathan writes, “One does not speak with a woman on the street, not even his own wife, and certainly not with another woman, on account of gossip.” (Aboth Rabbi Nathan 2 (1d)).** Accordingly, the disciples are scandalized by Jesus’ relationship with the woman, though they are too afraid to challenge him on the matter.

Jesus, however, had other intentions. He was seeking more than an earthly marriage. And so when the woman claims she has no man, our Lord replies that, in fact, the Samaritan woman has had five husbands, and the woman she has now is not her husband (4:18). Here many commentators have detected a sly reference to the Samaritan people as a whole, who were known for their religious promiscuity. J. Eugene Botha concludes, “The implication is that the woman’s moral life, as representative of the Samaritan’s, is also indicative of the quality of the worship of the Samaritans.”⁶ Indeed, the woman’s marital history echoes that of the Samaritans as described in 2 Kings 17:30-32. In their syncretism, the Samaritans were said to have worshiped the gods of five other nations. Josephus echoes this commonly-held assumption in his *Antiquities*, where he notes that the Samaritans incorporated the gods of five other countries, thus provoking “the Most High God to anger and wrath” (*Ant* 9.288). The Samaritan woman is, of course, an historical personage, but she also stands as a symbolic figure for her people. The question, John would have us ask, is whether the Samaritan woman will find in Jesus her true Bridegroom. Five husbands had not brought her any personal satisfaction or ultimate meaning. Earthly water could never satisfy her thirst. False religions could not deliver what she,

⁶J. Eugene Botha, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Speech Act Reading of John 4:1-42* (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 155.

representative of the Samaritan people, needed. Only Jesus could satisfy her longing. Only Jesus could provide living water. Only Jesus could serve as her true bridegroom.

Jesus as the True Locus for Worship

Indeed, this pericope makes it plain that true satisfaction is to be found nowhere else than the flesh and blood bridegroom. True worship therefore must be through the Son. The Samaritan woman first broaches the topic of worship, saying:

Our ancestors **worshiped** on this mountain, but you people claim that the place where men ought to **worship** God is in Jerusalem (4:20).

Many commentators have surmised that the Samaritan woman changes the subject in order to avoid the delicate matter of her own marital history. Yet our Lord takes this as an opportunity to discuss the nature of true worship.

Jesus replied, “Believe me, woman, an hour is coming when you will **worship** the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people **worship** what you do not understand, while we understand what we **worship**; after all salvation is from the Jews. Yet an hour is coming and is now here when the true **worshippers** will **worship** the Father in Spirit and truth. And indeed, it is just such **worshippers** that the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and those who **worship** Him must **worship** in Spirit and truth. (4:21-24)

The Greek word for worship “proskunew” appears ten times in five verses. Remarkably, the very heart of Jesus’ evangelism of the Samaritan woman centers on a discussion of worship.

Evangelism and worship intersect and overlap. And yet the dialogue, while fascinating, has proven somewhat enigmatic. What does it mean “to worship in Spirit and Truth?” Does this mean, as some have suggested, that true worship must eschew earthly elements? Is such worship marked by authenticity, and sincerity of heart? Or is there more?

Given the immediate context, we would do well to conclude that, with the advent of Christ, the worship of God will no longer be limited geographically. The Samaritans worshiped

on Mt. Gerizim. According to the Samaritan Pentateuch, Moses commanded that an altar be built on Mt. Gerizim. Samaritans also claimed the mountain as the holy place upon which Jacob received his vision of ascending and descending angels.⁷ Having received his vision, Jacob himself confessed, “This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven” (Gen 28:16-18). If Jacob claimed Mt. Gerizim as the house of God and the gate of heaven, who were the Samaritans to disagree?

⁷See John Macdonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 327-333; Josephus, *Ant.* 18:85-87.

Yet, Jesus contradicts the woman's assumptions, calling Samaritan worship inadequate: "You [sc. Samaritans] worship what you do not know. We worship what we know" (4:22). Perhaps, Jesus is playing on the words of Jacob, who, having awoken from his vision said, "Surely, the Lord was in this place and I did not know it" (Gen 28:16).⁸ Speaking in words reminiscent of his conversation with the Canaanite woman (15:24), Jesus adds, "Salvation comes from the Jews." However, our Lord does not stop with anti-Samaritan polemic; for he proceeds to say that even the Jerusalem temple was becoming obsolete. "For the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (4:21). Physical descent from the patriarch Abraham would not save the Jews, nor would Jacob save the Samaritans. Jacob's water cannot satisfy. Jacob's ladder is not the gate into heaven, and you will no longer find God in the temple. Or, perhaps, we should put the matter positively: Jesus is Jacob's ladder, the true gate to heaven. **As Nissen puts it, in Jesus, the Samaritan woman has found the link "between time and eternity."** He is the true temple of God, the place of his dwelling. By speaking in this way, Jesus prepares the Samaritan woman for heavenly worship, in which "there is no need of a temple," for the saints stand always in the presence of God and the Lamb. Not surprisingly, when the Samaritan woman leaves Jesus, she also leaves behind her water jug, for she wants only the water that can truly satisfy. And, then, she invites her fellow Samaritans on a pilgrimage of sorts, a pilgrimage not to Jerusalem or to Mt. Gerizim, but to Jesus, the one who reveals all things.

Worship in Spirit and Truth

⁸See Neyrey, "Jacob Traditions," 427-428.

With the passing significance of Gerizim and Jerusalem, some have concluded that the worship of God in this new hour is purely spiritual, that is, entirely without ties to physical or earthly elements. Worship in Spirit and Truth has been accordingly understood as synonymous with a type of heart-felt devotion, in opposition to the ceremonies of Judaism, Catholicism, or, for that matter, liturgical Lutheranism. In exegeting this passage, Calvin defined worship in spirit and truth in this way: “It is to lay aside the entanglements of ancient ceremonies, and to retain merely what is spiritual in the worship of God; for the truth of the worship of God consists in the spirit, and the ceremonies are but a sort of appendage.”⁹ Such an interpretation finds its modern-day counterpart in the work of F.F. Bruce, who writes, “Material things could at best be the vehicle of true worship but could never belong to its essence.” This type of interpretation lays the center of worship squarely within the human heart, and has little use for outward ceremonies. Within our own circles, many would agree that the liturgy is likewise an appendage to the gospel, and that heart-felt faith must take precedence.

However, the focus of John is not upon inward cleansing or pure intention, but upon the question of where God may be found and worshiped. The issue for discussion between the Samaritan woman and Jesus was not sincerity of heart, but the location of God. Where can God be found, so that he might bestow his blessings, even as we offer him our worship? John would have us know that there is a true geography of worship, and that worship centers in the person of Christ. Our Lord is the place where one meets and worships God. As Johannes Nissen puts it,

⁹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 163

“Jesus is the temple for the true worship of the Father. He is the new holy place.”¹⁰ To worship in Truth, then, is to recognize that the Father can only be known through his Son.

Worship, Wisdom, and the Word of Jesus

John would have us know that Jesus is the true place of God’s presence. To enter into his presence is to enter sacred space. As Marianne Meye Thompson puts it, “As the locus of God’s presence, Jesus serves as the “place” of epiphany, and so reidentifies the “place” of worship.”¹¹ This then begs the question: How does the reader enter into the sacred space which is Jesus. How does one come into contact with Jesus, and thereby worship the Father?

As Jesus is the very revelation of God in the flesh, this revelation comes first through the self-revelation of his Word. The story of the Samaritan woman is, after all, a conversation in which Jesus reveals himself through words. During this conversation, Jesus takes his interlocutor from the position of unbelief towards that of faith. Jesus leads the woman from a discussion of water, to living water, and from a discussion of worship to the revelation that he is indeed the promised Messiah, the one called Christ. The culmination of the conversation comes when the woman says, “I know that Messiah, the one called Christ, is coming. When that one

¹⁰Johannes Nissen, “Mission in the Fourth Gospel: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives,” in ed. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pederson *New Readings in John* (JSNTSS; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 224.

¹¹Marianne Meye Thompson, “Reflections on Worship in the Gospel of John,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 19 (1998) 269.

comes, he will announce to us all things.” Indeed, Jesus does then announce the most important thing, declaring, “I am, the one speaking to you.”

The Samaritans themselves began to believe in Christ when they heard the story of the woman, especially of her account of the small miracle: “He told me everything I have done.” (4:39). However, the Samaritans come to deeper belief not because of Jesus’ miracles, but because of his teaching, or, more precisely his word: “Many began to believe in him because of his **word**, and they said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe because of what you said; for we **have heard ourselves**’ (4:42). Through the word of Jesus, God accomplishes his purpose. He has found worshipers who will worship him in truth and Spirit. As Jesus preaches the Word, so also do the Samaritan people confess Jesus as “the Christ, the Savior of the World” (4:42).

Jesus as the Object of Worship

Much of recent Johannine scholarship has rightly recognized the role of Jesus as the place and mediation of God’s presence. We might add, that this pericope, among others, also prepares us for the reality that Jesus is himself the proper object of worship. As noted above, when discussing the role of the Messiah, Jesus himself claimed the title, saying, “I am, the one speaking to you.” For the woman, this probably was no more than a declaration of Messiahship. Notably, though, this is the first in a series of seven absolute “I am” sayings in the gospel of John. Richard Bauckham makes the intriguing observation that the number of “I am” statements in the gospel of John precisely matches the number of times in the OT where God identifies himself as the great “I am.” Bauckham writes, “The series of sayings thus comprehensively identifies Jesus with the God of Israel who sums up his identity in the declaration ‘I am he.’ More than that, these sayings identify Jesus as the eschatological revelation of the unique identity

of god, predicted by Deutero-Isaiah.”¹² Thus, through his evangelism of the Samaritan woman, he also prepares her for worship. This worship must be through him as mediator. Furthermore, he prepares her, as representative of the church, to see that worship must also be to him, who is true God who had made himself known even in the OT.

The Baptismal Context of Worship

As we have seen, the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman might be described as a type of courtship, during which catechesis, or to put it more simply, teaching takes place. In other places in scripture, we see that teaching leads to, and is paired with, baptism (i.e., Matt 28). May we also see in the story of the Samaritan woman a link between teaching and baptism?

In order to come to some preliminary answer to this question, we would to well, once again, to consider the context. Chapter three of John’s gospel is essentially baptismal in emphasis. The chapter begins with the story of Nicodemus, whom John pictures as representative of the Jewish people. He learns from Jesus the baptismal necessity “of being born of water and the Spirit” (3:5). Those who are baptized, are indeed “born of the spirit,” (3:8). Baptism is clearly the means by which the Spirit operates his miracle of regeneration. This is followed shortly after by a story of John the Baptizer (3:23) who was baptizing in Aeon, because of the abundance of water (3:24). After discussing with the Jews concerning ceremonial washing, the disciples of the Baptist describe Jesus in this way: “Here he is baptizing and everyone is coming to him” (3:26). The Baptist’s disciples picture Jesus as a type of magnet,

¹²Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 55-56.

attracting people to himself. And as he draws people to himself, so also does he baptize.

Chapter 4 then further develops the baptismal theme. John tells us the very reason that Jesus went to Samaria was that he had gained a reputation as a baptizer. Though he did not personally perform any baptisms himself, he “was making and baptizing more disciples than John,” and this fact apparently disturbed the jealous Pharisees (John 4:1).

Once Jesus meets the Samaritan woman, the conversation centers on the topic of water. The Samaritan woman thinks Jesus is speaking of ordinary water, but Jesus informs her that the water he provides is 1) a living water (4:10), with the result that 2) whoever drinks it will never thirst again (4:13), and within them will be 3) “a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” This water, of course, has reference to the Word of God. The Book of Proverbs speaks of the teaching of the wise as “a fountain of eternal life” (Prov 13:14; see also 18:4, and Isa 55:1). This living water is also closely associated with the Spirit of God, whom the prophets predicted God would pour out upon his people (i.e. Ezekiel 36:25-27). In John 7, Jesus himself speaks about the Spirit as a “Life-giving water” (7:37-38).¹³

May we see in this living water also a reference to baptism? The preceding context argues for such a conclusion. John introduces the story by describing Jesus as one who baptizes even more than John. Now, at the well, he carries out this Baptismal Ministry.

Some object that this is an unwieldy mixing of metaphors. Immersion clearly

¹³For a discussion on the use of water imagery in the gospel of John, see Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997). See also Craig Koester’s *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) esp. 155-184.

symbolizes the death of the old man, and a new birth from on high. The external application of water points to the washing away of sins. The drinking of water, however, seems to have no direct baptismal analogy. However, this type of logic did not prevent St. Paul from writing, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, . . .and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). Neither did this mixed metaphor stand in the way of early Christians. One of the earliest Christian symbols associated with baptism was that drawn from Psalm 42: “As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God” (42:1). Not surprisingly, early catacomb art featured pictures of the woman at the well as a symbol for Baptism (see Niewalda, p. 126). Indeed, the imagery of drinking in the life-giving spirit at baptism is natural, for it teaches an essential baptismal truth: namely, that not only do the waters of baptism wash away sins and offer second life, but through them, the Spirit enters the Christian and makes his home therein. By teaching about Baptism in this way, John may be combating a tendency towards seeing Baptism as simply an outward, symbolic ritual.

If we find it difficult, however, to decide whether the living water refers primarily to the Word, the Holy Spirit, or Baptism, this is, I suppose, as it should be. For the water, the Spirit, and the words of life all come from the same source, namely our Lord. Jesus is the one who offers life-giving waters (John 4) , his Spirit is life-giving (John 7), and he baptizes with the Spirit (John 1). John thus links life and water, water and the Spirit, the Spirit and life, and Baptism and the Spirit. Indeed, for the baptized Christian, Word, Water, Spirit, and Baptism are essentially and eternally linked in the person of Christ, from whose crucified body comes both water and Spirit (19:34). Did the Samaritan woman understand the baptismal context of Jesus’ words? Perhaps not at first. But then, many of the things which Jesus said, he said in order that

they might be remembered, and understood only later. The pericope then works on any number of levels. For the Samaritan woman as well as for the first-time reader, the words are enticing, and are for the purpose of evangelism. For the Christian, the reference to living water serves as catechesis, deepening our understanding of the sacramental reality of the church and of worship. To enter into the church is to receive the living waters. And to receive the living waters is to prepare for the heavenly worship of Revelation, where water flows from the throne of God and the Lamb.

We might add yet one more parallel to the story. As noted above, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is essentially one of betrothal. Jesus leads a woman, representative of the Samaritans, to the water of life. Perhaps Paul was thinking about these links between marriage and baptism when he wrote, “Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for her; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word” (Ephesians 5:25-26). The link between baptism and marriage is not simply a Pauline construction, but it has foundation in Christ’s own ministry. This is the marvel of John’s gospel. He demonstrates that theological truths and church practice have an incarnational basis within the life and work of our Lord.

Food and Obedience: Pointing Towards the Eucharist

As good Lutherans, having discussed baptism, we naturally turn towards the altar, and expect to find a discussion of our Lord’s Supper. This we do not find, at least explicitly, in the story of the Samaritan woman. However, we do note the following curious exchange, which occurs upon the disciples’ return from the city, where they had purchased food:

Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, “**Rabbi, eat.**” But he said to them, “I have **food to eat** of which you do not know. So the disciples said to one another, “Could someone have brought him **something to eat?**” Jesus said, “**My food** is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. (4:31-34)

As Nicodemus misunderstood our Lord’s reference to being born from on high, and the Samaritan woman did not understand Jesus’ reference to living water, the disciples are likewise befuddled by Jesus’ reference to hidden food. While the disciples are thinking about earthly food, Jesus is thinking about fulfilling the will of his Father. And what is the will of his Father? That he be lifted up on the cross, and thereby draw all peoples to himself. By bringing he Samaritans to himself, he is fulfilling that very mission. So, in this case, food is mission, the fulfillment of God’s will, or simply put, food is obedience..

This link between obedience and food is intriguing on any number of levels. It takes us back to the initial creation, where God issued one, and only one command. Then, the food of disobedience led to eternal death and separation from God.

As God began to create a new people for himself, he also used food as both a gift and a test of obedience. When the children of Israel grumbled because they were hungry, the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way, I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions” (Exodus 16:4). Later, in his explanation of Israelite history, Moses explains, “He gave manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you.” (Deut 8:16).

Again, our Lord’s own testing in the desert, an antitype of Israel’s own desert wanderings, features the link between obedience and eating. Drawing upon the story of manna in the desert,

our Lord rebukes Satan, saying, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4).

Our Lord makes the point, and John underlines it: to follow our Lord, the disciples too would need to learn obedience. And, perhaps nowhere is the test of obedience greater than in the command to observe the Lord’s Supper. To follow his command. Take eat. Take drink. John 6 would prove a major watershed in Jesus’ Ministry. Many left him because they could not stomach the notion of eating Jesus flesh or drinking his blood. Peter, however, learned the lesson of obedience to Christ’s word, saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life” (6:61).

John Bligh, in his insightful article, “Jesus in Samaria,” puts it this way, “By [eating manna] [the Israelites] discovered that God could give life and strength by apparently inadequate means. They were taught that man lives by obeying God’s commandments even when these seem foolish. The eating of the Eucharist, like the eating of manna, is an act of faith and of obedience through which the eater is strengthened.”

Ecclesial Exegesis

The way in which one understands the gospel of John depends, it seems to me, upon context in which it was written. (Is this a sectarian document, written for a group that is outside of dominant ecclesiastical structure, as is often claimed - - most recently in a provocative little book by Robert Gundry, or is the gospel written from a churchly perspective).¹⁴ Is this a

¹⁴For a persuasive argument that the fourth gospel was in fact written to a sectarian community, see Richard Bauckham, “The Audience of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Jesus in the Johannine Tradition* (eds. Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher; Louisville: Westminster Knox, 2001) 101-114.

document written to combat an overemphasis on the sacraments, or rather is it an attempt to demonstrate that the institutions of the church are intimately related to “what Jesus said and did in his life.” (Brown, CXIV). I would suggest that the Word of the Gospel is not only the foundation of the church, but it was written by a churchman, in the context of the church. In a book of the church, we should fully expect to see churchly references to such things as baptism, the Lord’s supper and the like. Granted, we have entered into a type of hermeneutical circle, but this is the very nature of the New Testament. It is a Word of God which comes from Christ’s apostles, and thus from the very heart of the church. The Word is born of the church, even as it sustains her.

Implications: Evangelism and Mission Leads to Worship

What might the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman say about the way in which we approach evangelism, missions, and worship? In the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we see evangelism and catechesis as a type of courtship. In this courtship, Jesus leads the would-be-believer not only to faith, but into the church where faith is created and sustained. The reader is led to understand that in order to take Jesus as the bridegroom, one must enter into the position of the churchly bride. Often today, evangelism embraces Jesus, but ignores the church. Often, evangelism is a product of what is called the parachurch. Yet, John would have us know that evangelism leads directly into the church, where Jesus makes himself known in the Word and in the Sacramental realities. Therefore, in our evangelism and catechesis, we must not only lead people into a so-called personal relationship with Jesus, but we must lead them into the church, the very place where Christ offers his gifts and expresses his intimate love towards us.

Too often, I think, the church is thought of as incidental to salvation, and the sacraments

are treated as if they were appendages to the gospel message, an addition to the core evangelistic purpose of proclaiming Jesus as Savior. Yet, Jesus incorporates a type of sacramental preparation even into his evangelism. What better way to entice the world to the baptismal waters than with a discussion of living water? What better way to prepare a person for the eucharist than by discussing the bread of life? Often in pedagogy, the student learns to perform tasks, and only later to understand their significance. So also, in the gospel of John, Jesus teaches and introduces, with the expectation that understanding will come later, even as the Spirit is released at his crucifixion and resurrection. Of course, the reader is in a privileged position, for he already knows the end of the story, and is already participating in the sacramental realities which our Lord introduces. Thus, Jesus' teaching is evangelism for the Samaritan woman, and it is also catechesis for the church. Even as he introduces the woman to himself, he leads us deeper into the sacramental realities by which he makes himself known. And likewise he leads us into the church, not as an institution set apart from Christ, but as the very place where he offers his good gifts, and where eternal worship begins.

