

Verax-Konferenz

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WORSHIP AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

INTRODUCTION

If asked, most Christians would say that evangelism and worship are two quite different things. The Great Commission requires us to address man, while in worship we address God. In that sense, of course, evangelism and worship are indeed distinct. But at a different level there is a close connection — to evangelise effectively we need to be worshipping people.

I do not mean that worship itself is an evangelistic exercise, although in some circumstances the church at worship *can* play an evangelistic role. Paul writes; “Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all ... prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you” (1 Cor. 14:23-25). We all know of people who came to faith in Christ during a normal worship service.

But this is not my point when I speak of an essential connection between worship and evangelism. Rather, my thesis is that only those who belong to a worshipping community are adequately equipped (individually and corporately) to participate in the Great Commission.

In order to develop this thesis, I have divided this paper into two parts. The first is a meditation on Joshua 5:13-6:5, while in the second I will apply Joshua’s experience to ourselves, considering relevant NT teaching and drawing practical conclusions.

PART 1. THE BATTLE FOR JERICHO

Like all OT Scripture, Joshua’s conquest of the promised land is full of lessons for the NT church (Rom. 15: 4). I assume at the outset that one such lesson is that the church of Christ is engaged in a war of conquest over the powers of darkness — a war in which “the gates of hell” will surely yield to the ‘armies’ of the Son of God (Matt. 16:18). Our weapons of attack are spiritual, not carnal, and consist in the preaching of the gospel in such a way as to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Against that background, then, let us consider Joshua’s experience.

1.1 Who is in charge?

Having crossed the Jordan into Canaan, the armies of the Lord found their way barred by the mighty walled city of Jericho. Although the city was in ‘siege mode’ Joshua could not simply pass it by and move on, for that would leave a powerful enemy behind his lines. Jericho stood in their way and must be overthrown.

But how? The city seemed impregnable, walled up to heaven. Joshua, walking alone, surveyed it from afar and mused on his options for attack. Should they use ladders to scale those lofty walls? Or seek to batter down the gates? Or accept months of delay and simply

starve the defendants out? None of the alternatives was attractive. A heavy responsibility rested on his shoulders as the newly appointed leader of God's people.

Suddenly he became aware of a figure standing nearby with a drawn sword. No coward, Joshua approached him demanding to know his allegiance; "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" (5:13). The reply must have come as a shock to Joshua. "No, but as Commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." How could this be? Wasn't Joshua himself the head of the Lord's army? How could there be another such commander? Joshua immediately knew the answer; this was JAHWE himself, the pre-incarnate Christ in theophany. Joshua "fell on his face to the earth and worshipped".

The first lesson Joshua needed to learn as he launched the campaign to possess the promised land was this — although he was the human leader of God's people, he was not ultimately in charge. God reserves that privilege to himself. It is all too easy for Christian leaders, evangelists and missionaries to take control of evangelistic endeavour and forget that without Christ they can do nothing (John 15:5). This is especially true for those whose ministries are successful in men's eyes and who come to believe that their success is due to their own abilities (God-given though they are). But God's work can only be conducted successfully when we realise that beyond human leaders, however gifted they might be, stands a greater "commander of the Lord's armies" — Christ himself.

But what of those who are not apparently successful, who fight and labour without obvious fruit? They should be encouraged — ultimately they are not in charge, for "the battle is the Lord's" and his sovereign purpose will surely be fulfilled through their labours (2 Cor. 2:14-17).

1.2 Joshua's submission and response

"Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped and said to him, 'What does my Lord say to his servant?'" (5:14). Notice three things about Joshua's response. Firstly, he recognised this stranger as God and offered worship — something that belongs to the Deity alone and not to any angelic messenger. He was dealing not with some exalted fellow-servant but directly with God himself. Similarly, when Jesus sent his disciples out to fulfil the Great Commission he did not promise them the help of angelic legions but rather that His own personal presence would be with them throughout the gospel age. When we worship we stand in the presence of God. When we evangelise we do the same. To preach the gospel is not to go out *from* the presence of the Lord but to go out *with* the divine presence. The divine commander is no back-seat general directing affairs from some remote headquarters. Here he stood in enemy territory, sword in hand, ready to make war. So Christ is present *with* us in the forefront of the battle for the souls of men. And he is in control.

Secondly, Joshua submitted to the Lordship of his God. True worship begins with the recognition of God's presence but it must also involve submission to the will of God — and that is not always so easy! If Christ is truly in charge we shall submit to his direction, not follow our own headstrong plans and ideas. There were many in Christ's own day who appeared to worship, but who did not submit to him in obedience: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', but do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46).

Thirdly, and as a consequence of submission, he was ready to listen: "what does my Lord say to his servant?" Full-orbed worship involves far more than offering praise to God; it also involves listening to his Word. We cannot worship truly unless we hear and receive "what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7 et seq). We are often too quick to propose our own ideas and too slow to hear what God is saying to us, and this applies equally in worship and in evangelism.

But exactly what did the Lord have to say to Joshua at this juncture? I have no doubt in my mind that Joshua expected at that moment to receive instructions about the battle plan. He was seeking practical help and advice from his Commander. How should he approach the fortress and dispose his men? What equipment should he requisition (ladders, battering rams or what)? But no such instructions were forthcoming — there was a greater priority than Joshua's action plan!

1.3 A deeper worship

“Then the Commander of the LORD'S army said to Joshua, ‘Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy’. And Joshua did so” (5:15). This was surely unexpected, for had not Joshua already adopted an attitude of worship — with all it entailed in terms of obedience, submission and listening? What more could God expect of him? The answer is that in his eagerness to do battle and serve his God, Joshua was in danger of worshipping superficially. It is true that he had fallen on his face and acknowledged the divine presence, but more was needed before Joshua could serve appropriately.

While we shall never render perfect worship in our fallen condition, there are degrees of worship just as there are degrees of faith. Like Moses at the burning bush, Joshua needed to be reminded of the holiness of God, not just his greatness. When we enter the presence of God we stand on holy ground and must respond accordingly. To remove one's shoes simply symbolised the response of the heart to the holiness of God. The Lord would not let Joshua go to battle without a deeper understanding of his ineffable purity, glory and transcendence. In the same way, He would not allow Moses to deliver Israel from the land of bondage until he too had recognised the true nature of the God who called him to this service (Ex. 3:5-6).

1.4 God's strategy for victory

Now at last Joshua was ready to be shown the divine strategy for defeating Jericho (6:1-5). This consisted of three stages, none of which would have been obvious to Joshua had he not first learned to esteem and worship God aright.

Firstly and basically, Joshua was shown that human weapons alone would never defeat Jericho — only divine power could deal with those towering walls. Even if Joshua had possessed a complete armoury of ladders, battering rams, catapults and so forth, they would have proved ineffectual against the defences of so strong an enemy. So also we must ultimately look to God's supervening action if the gates of hell are to be breached and its captives released. We will consider this further in Part 2.

Secondly, however, this did not mean that Joshua and his army were to do nothing! They were to march around the city day after day displaying the ark of the covenant and trumpeting its presence by sounding horns. Here is a picture of the patient and repeated proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the ark pictures him alone, the priests represent his heralds, and the trumpets are his gospel declared. The number seven speaks of the perfection of God's strategy.

Thirdly, once God had, without Joshua's help, reduced those seemingly impregnable walls to rubble, each soldier had an energetic role to play. Jericho and its inhabitants were to be destroyed utterly, with the exception of Rahab and her family. They might have flinched from the severity of their task had Joshua not understood the holiness of God and his hatred of the unmentionable sins of the Canaanites. Happily today we are not called to destroy men's lives but to save them — using the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God — and Joshua's warfare is for us just a picture of the spiritual conflict in which “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood ...” (Eph. 6:12).

PART 2. THE APPLICATION TO OURSELVES

What, then, are the lessons we may learn from Joshua's encounter with the Captain of the hosts of the Lord?

2.1. God retains control

Although Joshua was the God-appointed leader of his people, God himself was ultimately in control — in the person of the pre-incarnate Christ. It is Christ who builds his church, not man, for without him we can do nothing (Matt. 16:18; John 15:5). Paul declares, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase" (1Co 3:6-7). To recognise this is to give God the glory and acknowledge that we are 'nothing' and God is all — which is the foundation of all true worship. Contrariwise, a failure to render this worship to God will cause us to rely on human abilities and effort which will ultimately prove fruitless.

2.2. Christ is with us in the battle

In the battle against Jericho, Christ was a present 'sword-in-hand' leader not merely a backroom strategist. He promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20; see also Heb. 13:5-6). Christ remains among us in the person of the Holy Spirit who is our constant companion in the work of the gospel. As a result, the church that grows through Christ-centred evangelism is not just an organisation but "a holy temple, a habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2: 21-22). We cannot separate evangelism and church-growth from the *function* of the church as a 'holy temple', that is, a place of spiritual worship.

2.3. Worship must precede work

Christ demanded Joshua's worship before instructing him concerning the battle. So also he requires of us that worship must precede work — for unless we worship we shall not (1) understand the power of God, (2) recognise his strategies or (3) obey his commands. We will be like an army that underestimates its resources, misinterprets its commander's strategy, and ignores his orders. And that is a recipe for failure. See how Paul explains how the gospel works (1 Cor. 2:1-5; 1 Thess. 1:5-8).

2.4. Preaching the real gospel

In particular, our worship must seek an appreciation of the holiness of God — the realisation that in his presence we stand on holy ground. Unless we proclaim the holiness of God we shall not preach the real gospel, for we shall neither understand the seriousness of sin nor the true meaning of the cross (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

2.5. Evangelism involves elements of worship

The conquest of Jericho involved key elements of worship. Firstly, there was a patient waiting upon God — walking around the city for seven days when nothing seemed to happen. We can easily grow weary of well-doing unless we habitually wait upon God in worship. "But those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).

2.6. Preaching Christ

Secondly, during this fallow period, the Israelites were not idle! The ark of the covenant was both paraded and heralded for all to see. So in evangelising the lost we must continue patiently to preach Christ — displaying all the attributes of the Son of God pictured by the ark (holiness; a meeting place with God; keeper of the law; the manna from heaven; the rod that budded [picturing the resurrection]). This too is worship of the most biblical kind, in which Christ is heralded and displayed in his glory as the Son of God.

2.7. Expecting God to do great things

Thirdly, there was expectation — they looked in worship to God for the exercise of his majestic power. Those walls would never be breached by human effort, only by divine power. Their expectant waiting upon God for him to manifest his glory was also worship.

2.8. Corporate evangelism by a worshipping church

We now turn to some general NT points. Firstly, evangelists are among Christ's gifts *to the church* (Eph. 4: 11-12). 'He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ'. It is therefore from the church (the worshipping community) that evangelists go out — for 'how shall they preach unless they are sent?' (Rom. 10:15).

2.9. Worship and the Great Commission

Secondly, look again at the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19-20; "And when they saw Him they worshipped Him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying: 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and in earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'."

Note that it was to a *worshipping* people that the Commission was given. Had they all doubted there could surely have been no commission! Then again, the Commission is introduced by the claims of Christ to have all authority in heaven and earth. What greater incentive can there be to worship the Son of God? Finally, they were to "make disciples". Yet what is a disciple if not one who worships God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)?

2.10. A worshipping community

Thirdly, it was as the early church praised God and fellowshiped together as a worshipping community that the Lord added to their number: "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47).

2.11. Evangelism calls men to worship the true and living God

Paul proclaimed a God who was to be *worshipped*: "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE

UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). And again, his enemies accused him: "This fellow *persuades men to worship* God contrary to the law" (Acts 18:13; emphasis added).

And finally, it is the nature of the everlasting gospel that it calls men to the worship of God: "Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth, saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water." (Rev. 14:6-7).

Only those who are themselves worshipers can issue such a call!